

PIERS PLOWMAN AND THE INVENTION OF THE LYRIC
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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This dissertation seeks to reconcile *Piers Plowman*'s continual use of popular lyric traditions with the concerns that the poem raises regarding the moral value and didactic efficacy of poetic "making." The lyric is crucial to both the structure and poetic methods of *Piers Plowman*, shaping the poem's most complex literary effects while bringing to focus the poem's interrogation of the utility of literature generally. The result is that *Piers Plowman* is at its most and least "literary" when it is being lyrical; although its lyric passages evoke popular modes of song and entertainment, they are, simultaneously, often so oddly integrated that their value is called into question. Both in its form and the expository discourses of its allegorical characters, the poem unites its unusual concordance of medieval poetic genres and commonplaces under a guiding principle of the ethics of literary production and consumption, yet also generates a continual friction between its *modus agendi*, or "way of proceeding," and its literary models.

Grasping this aspect of the poem's achievement requires an investigation into medieval ideas of genre in general, and the lyric in particular, that has not been carried out for the poem so far. The first

chapter reviews modern critical notions of the lyric genre in light of the corpus of medieval short poetry, which has largely resisted systematic classification. It concludes with a reading of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* that demonstrates the utility of modern lyric criticism to the interpretation of medieval hybrid narratives. The second chapter explores grammatical treatises, glosses, and commentaries in order to identify a genuinely medieval taxonomy of genre and the place that lyric might have had in it.

Chapters three and four employ the interpretative strategies developed in the first half of the dissertation to perform readings of *Piers Plowman*'s lyricism. Chapter three focuses on the medieval lyric's potential to create an experiential literature—a literature with which the audience personally identifies—and its importance to *Piers Plowman*'s idea of a moral poetics. Chapter four investigates the final passūs of *Piers Plowman* and the lyric's central role in the sacred re-enactments that it stages.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Curtis Roberts-Holt Jirsa was born with twin sister Emily Dixon-Jones Jirsa on August 25, 1979 in Plattsburgh, New York, to parents Robert E. Jirsa and Deryl C. Holt. His older sister, Amy Curtis-Holt Jirsa, had been born two years earlier in Nebraska. He spent his youth in New England and North Carolina and in 1997 graduated from Daniel Hand High School in Madison, Connecticut. From there he moved north to Brunswick, Maine to attend Bowdoin College, where he majored in English and minored in Computer Science. He graduated *summa cum laude* in 2001 with honors in English for a thesis on the fourteenth-century Middle English poem, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. His subsequent enrollment in the Program in Medieval Studies at Cornell University in 2001 marked his first return to upstate New York in over twenty years. With focuses in Middle English, Old French, and Old English literatures, he earned his M.A. in 2004 and graduated with his Ph.D. in January of 2008.

For my mother and father

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Introduction

The affinities between William Langland's mid-fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman* and medieval lyric poetry have often been noted, but rarely pursued. This dissertation is an attempt to correct this oversight. A substantial investigation of *Piers Plowman*'s lyricism has yet to be made in part because the poem's debts to other literary traditions, such as sermons and visionary poetry, are more visible and easily scrutinized. *Piers Plowman*'s engagement with lyric poetry, however, is just as deep—if not deeper—than with other genres, and of greater consequence to the poem's most fundamental concerns about the place of literary “making,” or composition, in the fallen world.

At first glance, *Piers Plowman* might not seem a likely vehicle for lyricism. One of the longer extant poems in Middle English, the text is a sprawling, narrative dream vision with a substantial cast of characters and a startling variety of integrated literary modes. The lyric, on the other hand, is, if nothing else, a short poem. Although a difficult category to define in medieval literature, the lyric, as modern scholars typically conceive it, is a genre whose constituent texts tend to present static scenes, meditations, or narrative fragments in lieu of the sequential progression of longer narrative or dramatic forms.¹ The lyric typically focuses on personal or emotional content rather than concrete events, being more meditative than dramatic or expository. And, as a form originally rooted in song, the lyric is often said to retain conspicuous musical qualities, while a number of manuscripts (such

¹ See Chapter One for a more detailed discussion of lyric properties.

as those containing troubadour poetry) include musical notation (although, as we shall see in the following chapter, some longer narrative poems in Middle English boast rhyme and metric patterns just as complex as those found in lyrics).

With few exceptions, the lyric has been conspicuously neglected in *Piers Plowman* scholarship. No mention of the lyric appears in Morton Bloomfield's 1962 pioneering survey of the genres and "Denkformen" of *Piers Plowman*; nor does any entry for "the lyric" appear in the index of Derek Pearsall's 1982 *Annotated Bibliography* of the poem. Yet two critics have turned attention to the invocation of lyrical form in the poem's repeated gestures of "beginnings." The first is Anne Middleton, who in her 1982 article on "The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*" identifies the series of formulaic interludes that separate the poem's multiple dream visions as essentially lyrical in character.² The B-text of *Piers Plowman* contains eight dream visions all told (excluding dreams within dreams), each prefaced by an interlude that recounts the activities of the narrator, Will, in the waking world before he succumbs to sleep and slips into his next dream. The resulting alternation between vision and interlude in the B-text can be mapped out as follows:³

Visio

Introduction: Prologue 1-10

Dream 1: Pr. 11-5.2

Interlude 1: 5.3-8

² Middleton 1982b.

³ This outline is reproduced from Wittig 1997, 15-6. The line numbers refer to Kane and Donaldson's Athlone edition of the poem.

Dream 2: 5.9-7.145
Interlude 2: 7.145-8.66

Vita
Dream 3: 8.67-12.297
First dream-within-dream: 11.5-406
Interlude 3: 13.1-21

Dream 4: 13.22-14.355
Interlude 4: 14.335-15.11

Dream 5: 15.12-17.356
Second dream-within-dream: 16.19-166
Interlude 5: 18.1-6

Dream 6: 18.7-425
Interlude 6: 18.425-19.5

Dream 7: 19.5-480
Interlude 7: 19.481-20.52

Dream 8: 20.52-386

Conclusion: 20.386⁴

The B-text is one of the three major versions of *Piers Plowman* thought by scholars to have circulated in late medieval England (the other two versions are identified by the letters A and C⁵), all the work of the same author.⁶ Each version of the poem is partitioned not into books but into passūs (singular “passus”), a Latin word meaning “steps” (and

⁴ Wittig 1997, 15-6.

⁵ A is commonly held to be earlier than B, which in turn predates C. The A-B-C chronology, however, is not accepted by all scholars. Mann 1994, for instance, argues that the A version is in fact a later abbreviation for non-clerical readers. For more information on the texts and manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*, see Hanna 1996 and Eyler and Benson 2005.

There is some debate as to whether a fourth version of *Piers Plowman* exists, referred to as the Z-text. A. G. Rigg and Charlotte Brewer, who have edited the fourth or “Z” version of *Piers Plowman* (preserved in one manuscript, MS Bodley 851), hypothesize that it predates the A text. See Rigg and Brewer 1983.

⁶ Although modern scholars have largely accepted the idea that one person authored all of the versions, there have, in the past, been proponents of theories of multiple authors. See Middleton 1988, 6-8.

thus all of the sections of the poem comprise a series of steps, or a journey). Although the passus is the poem's fundamental organizational unit, rubrics in medieval manuscripts divide the poem in other consistent ways, perhaps as a further aid to comprehension. The most common organizational scheme found in manuscripts is the bifurcation of the poem into two halves: the *Visio* ("vision") and the *Vita* ("life"), as seen in the outline above; however, these categories are likely later scribal additions and not original to the poem.

As Middleton noted, the descriptions of Will's waking activities during the interludes are markedly consistent in structure and imagery, providing each discrete vision with something of a common inception. The following excerpts from the Prologue and the first two interludes demonstrate their parallel form and conspicuous portrayal of the natural world:

In a somer seson whan softe was þe sonne,
I shoop me into a shroud as I a sheep weere;
In habite as an heremite, vnholy of werkes,
Wente wide in þis world wondres to here.
Ac on a May morwenyng on Maluerne hilles
Me bifel a ferly, of Fairye me þoste.
I was very forwandred and wente me to reste
Vnder a brood bank by a bourne syde,
And as I lay and lenede and loked on þe watres
I slombred into a slepyng, it sweyed so murye. (Prol.5-10)

Ac er I hadde faren a furlong feyntise me hente
That I ne myzte ferper a foot for defaute of slepyng.
I sat softly adoun and seide my bileue,
And so I bablede on my bedes þei brouzte me aslepe. (5.5-8)

Thus, yrobed in russet, I romed aboute
Al a somer seson for to seke dowel. . .
Thus I wente widewher dowel to seke,

And as I wente by a wode, walkyng myn one,
Blisse of þe briddes abide me made,
And vnder a lynde vpon a launde lened I a stounde
To lerne þe layes þat louely foweles made.
Murþe of hire mouþes made me to slepe; (8.1-2, 62-7)

In all three of these examples, Will wanders and “roams about” the world before being lulled to sleep by some sort of natural stimulus. Will’s waking activity is erratic, though not necessarily aimless, for his wanderings are sometimes motivated by a particular goal. In the Prologue, for instance, Will seeks “wondres,” while in the second interlude, having been influenced to some extent by his dream experiences, he pursues something far more specific: the elusive figure of Dowel, or “Do-Well.” Despite this more tangible goal, Will’s mode of proceeding is no more sophisticated in Passus 8 than it was in the Prologue: he still roams the wilderness, depending on chance to provide his next adventure.

Will’s pilgrimatical method of investigation might not strike us as particularly conducive to the sort of serious moral inquiry with which he is concerned, but it nevertheless provides the template for the greater part of his waking moments. Middleton has accounted for the inclusion of these interludes in *Piers Plowman* by suggesting that they allude not directly to the substance of *Piers Plowman*’s dream allegory, but instead to a popular exordial convention common to a late medieval lyric form known in English criticism as the *chanson d’aventure*.⁷ Helen Sandison, in her dated but unrivaled study of the

⁷ Middleton 1982. The term *chanson d’aventure* (which Middleton writes as *d’avanture*), first proposed by E. K. Chambers to describe a particular type of medieval English lyric with roots in French and Occitan poetry, has gained little currency in modern French criticism, where such poems are usually referred to by a

Middle English *chanson d'aventure* and its French models, describes the formulaic exordia of the *chansons* as follows:

The preliminaries to the adventure are, as in France, the designation of day, hour, and season, the appearance of the solitary poet “wandering by the way,” the announcement of his mood and his motive for being abroad, and the tale of his unexpected encounter with some frequenter of field or forest.⁸

Piers Plowman’s Prologue and a number of its later interludes cleave to this formula, though Will’s wandering usually results in sleep and not worldly adventure, transposing the unexpected encounters of the *chanson d'aventure* motif into the visionary landscape of the dream. Will’s wanderings thus succeed in triggering unexpected encounters, but only in his fantasy.

The consistent use of this lyric opening throughout *Piers Plowman* constitutes what Middleton refers to as the poem’s “enigmatic design,” as opposed to its explicit one. *Piers Plowman*, she argues, lacks an explicit framework that makes plain its design and intent. Whereas other long Middle English poems often contain some sort of prologue or epilogue delivered by the poet *in propria persona* that dictates the poem’s form or purpose, *Piers Plowman* avoids any such declarations, substituting instead the *chanson d'aventure* exordium as a framing mechanism. The result is a poem that communicates its intent implicitly through the lyric conventions it has appropriated in lieu of any other explicit framing strategies.

variety of other generic labels, such as *chanson dramatique*, *chanson d'amour*, or *pastourelle*. See Sandison 1913, 3.

⁸ Sandison 1913, 25. Sandison’s monograph, despite its age, remains one of the most exhaustive studies on the subject.

In the specific case of the *chanson d'aventure*'s conventional opening—an exordial commonplace known variously as the *reverdie* or springtime introduction (the German term is *Natureingang*, or “nature introduction”)—it is most often used in medieval poetry as a formal prologue to short poems.⁹ *Piers Plowman*'s extended use of the *reverdie* throughout its series of visions thus “put a great deal of stress on the delicate and uninsistent ambiguity of the original short form, and changed its capacity to carry meaning.” Rather than using the *reverdie*—as do the *chansons d'aventure*—to generate a single, brief encounter, *Piers Plowman* instead relates a lifetime “given over to such *avantures* and marvels”¹⁰ thus adapting the *reverdie* as the generating impulse for a long, narrative poem, the literal source of all of its allegory.

If we thus understand the whole of *Piers Plowman* to be generated from this conventional lyric exordium we can, according to Middleton, at last uncover the poem's elusive “instructions for use,” despite the absence of an expository prologue. For in a *chanson d'aventure*, truth is presented not explicitly, but obliquely, “to peripheral vision.” The most critical disclosures in the *chanson* are those that are unexpected and unsought for, and they are sustained only so long as the *chanson*'s narrator-adventurer “defers uttering a correct verdict” on their true nature.¹¹ This lyric paradigm, when recognized as the model

⁹ The *Natureingang* introduces several long French narratives as well, including Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, Guillaume de Lorris' *Le Roman de la Rose*, and the epic poem *Prise d'Orange*. Though the engagement with the motif in these poems is not quite as repetitious and sustained as it is in *Piers Plowman*.

¹⁰ Middleton 1982a, 115.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

for *Piers Plowman*'s own mode of proceeding, explains some of the poem's most enigmatic qualities, such as its nonlinear thematic and narrative development and Will's consistent failure to comprehend the truths imparted by the poem's authoritative figures. His continual misunderstanding is to our own benefit, as his failed pursuit of knowledge perpetuates the poem's series of moral and theological disclosures for the audience's consumption. In this way, *Piers Plowman* also implicitly models the potential of all literary forms to impart truth, for poetic truth

can only be found, not sought. . . . It offers itself to a social being only momentarily cast back upon himself in reflection or "play," perhaps in malaise but not in mortal danger. Its "message" is not, as in the Boethian model, either set forth systematically or securely absorbed by the speaker as enlightening or salvific knowledge.¹²

Thus when Will is compelled by the allegorical figure Imaginative in Passus 12 to defend his penchant for writing poetry, he does so by insisting that such eminent figures as Cato used poetic "making" for solace and play (B.12.21-24). Will's defense of poetry, for Middleton, acknowledges what *Piers Plowman* implicitly models via its lyric framework: unexpected truths are exposed in moments of "play" or distraction. They cannot be deliberately sought, as Will's failed and consistent inquiries demonstrate. Thus even seemingly misleading literature can reveal the proper path and be of some moral and didactic value. As we shall see over the course of this study, however, the concerns about the moral potential of literature voiced in *Piers*

¹² Ibid., 116.

Plowman cannot all be answered in this respect, and the lyric, with its emphasis on personal experience, provides richer didactic opportunities than any other literary form, making it the most potent of all of Langland's literary sources for communicating moral truths.

More recently, D. Vance Smith has, in *The Book of the Incipit*, reexamined the role of *Piers Plowman*'s Prologue and interludes as the poem's "multifold inception," or series of re-beginnings.¹³ He, like Middleton, acknowledges the Prologue's "evasion of formal statements of purpose or form," which he takes to be "the first evidence of its concealment of design or foreconceit": a concealment which violates the prescriptions of medieval rhetorical treatises, which demand explicit disclosures of form and intent at the beginning of a written work that accurately presage the material that is to follow.¹⁴ Rather than provide a clear introduction to the rest of the poem, however, Will's wanderings in the Prologue instead relate those very authorial activities that should have been completed before the act of composition was even begun: "unlike almost every other medieval poet or rhetorician," Smith claims, "the poet narrator of *Piers* is still in the act of discovering his material, engaged in the process of invention after the poem has already begun."¹⁵ The act of "invention" (from Latin *invenio*, "to find"), of finding and discovering suitable topics of discourse, is, according to Smith, precisely what Will models in the Prologue when he "finds" the field full of folk and Truth's tower: an allegorical landscape of human existence that comprises both the

¹³ Smith 2001, 46.

¹⁴ Ibid., 57.

¹⁵ Ibid., 67.

poem's narrative setting and the locus of its moral concerns. Because the Prologue thus narrates what should in fact have been its own "prehistory" (i.e. its invention and predisposition in the poet's mind) and because none of *Piers Plowman's* multiple inceptions properly presages the nature of the action that follows, Smith considers them to be failed beginnings. The fact that each beginning fails to fulfill its rhetorical role explains why *Piers Plowman* returns so often to its lyric interludes: it is repeatedly attempting to begin anew. "As a series of beginnings," Smith argues, the interludes "signify the failure of the previous one to make a true beginning. The work must be started over again. But as beginnings, each one signifies the potential of the origin resonating in the form of the dream that begins over and over again."¹⁶

Smith is surely right to emphasize the rhetorical importance of *Piers Plowman's* Prologue and interludes as well as their inefficacy as the sort of explicit exordial moves recommended in medieval rhetorical treatises. Yet as Middleton has already in part demonstrated, these lyric moments that Smith faults are legitimate commencements in their own right, and what Langland seems to be doing here, as indeed he does throughout the entire poem, is combining a number of literary and discursive modes in order to create a hybrid text that moves repeatedly between lyric inceptions and narrative progression. It is a didactic, allegorical debate poem that proceeds tangentially like a lyric, and it declares that lyrical mode implicitly in its multiple inceptions, which are not repeated attempts to re-commence the poem correctly, but rather overt indications of the poem's lyric, cyclical structure.

¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

Nor is *Piers Plowman*'s lyricism confined to its Prologue and interludes. In its gross, cyclical structure, which moves repeatedly from interlude to dream, the poem reveals itself to be more reiterative than sequential, and thus more lyrical than narrative. The repetitive and discontinuous nature of the poem is embodied most clearly in the narrator Will. Isolated by his disruptive awakenings from his visions and his marked inability to put the knowledge he acquires into practice, Will's experiences over the course of the poem are not progressive, but repetitive and reiterative. The type of discontinuous experience that the poem generates under these conditions is what Northrop Frye would consider an essentially lyrical characteristic. In lyric poetry, he suggests, "we turn away from our ordinary continuous experience in space or time, or rather from a verbal mimesis of it. . . . We are circling around a defined theme instead of having our attention thrown forward to see what comes next." The lyric poet's potential for progression is obstructed, his or her attempts to return to an ordinary, continuous experience of time rebuffed by "something that blocks normal activity, something a poet has to write poetry about instead of carrying on with ordinary experience."¹⁷ In this image of the frustrated lyricist we can detect a reflection of the narrator, Will, whose incessant search for Dowel and Piers the Plowman draws him repeatedly from normal, waking activity into a series of reiterative visions that he then (so the narrative fiction would have us believe) forms and shapes into the poem that we read. In this sense, *Piers Plowman*'s lyric form amplifies and reflects Will's inability to quit the

¹⁷ Ibid., 31, 35, 32.

dream world; it is a poetic manifestation of his incessant need to slip from waking reality into visions where divine truth is exposed to view. In this sense, *Piers Plowman* is much like a long lyric, circling its main themes, contemplating them, giving voice to frustrations never dispelled. But it is also a narrative dream vision that, like so many other instances of the genre in medieval French, English, and Latin literature, is a hybrid encompassing a wide range of poetic registers.

The goal of this dissertation is to delve into *Piers Plowman*'s mixed form and expose its intersections with the rich and highly-developed traditions of medieval lyric poetry. I shall argue for the existence of a lyric poetics in *Piers Plowman* that bears upon the poem's voiced concerns regarding the moral efficacy of literary production. Lyric poetry, while comprising perhaps the most heavily-criticized literary form within the poem, nevertheless possesses an extraordinary capacity for moral significance on account of its ability to provide an experiential situation, as we shall see in later chapters. But more than merely modeling a moral poetics, *Piers Plowman* is, in many respects, a commentary on literature itself, and its use and critique of lyric poetry to these ends has received only cursory treatment by modern scholars.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty inherent to a study of *Piers Plowman* and lyric is the definition of the lyric itself. The medieval European lyric genre as literary scholars conceive it is substantial, encompassing thousands of poems in Latin and the vernacular languages. But although the genre is well-attested, it is also poorly-defined, and this by necessity—for any attempt to define the medieval lyric according to

its essential characteristics inevitably excludes a range of poems for which modern criticism has found no label more appropriate than “lyric.” The result is a genre more heterogeneous than any other in medieval literature, comprised of a diffuse assortment of poems varying in length, structure, subject, and tone. Some lyrics were obviously set to music while others were not. Some lyrics contain narratives while others are more meditative, dwelling on static images or fragmentary narratives rather than a sequence of events. Some adopt a first-person perspective, while others are in the third-. “We must accept,” Rosemary Greentree concedes in her recent bibliography of the Middle English lyric, “the diverse nature of the [lyric] poems and. . . question the worth of any idea of coherence in the genre.”¹⁸

In order to address the typological difficulties inherent to any study of medieval lyricism, the first half of this dissertation will focus on the idea of lyric as a literary form. The first chapter, entitled “Appraisals of Lyric, Medieval and Modern,” deals with the question of the lyric in its most essential features: what is a lyric, and what constitutes lyricism? Can we analyze medieval lyrics with the same interpretative strategies employed in the critical traditions of other literary periods, or is the medieval lyric a thing apart? The second chapter, “Medieval Genre Theory and Lyric Hermeneutics,” approaches the question of genre from a more medieval perspective, examining rhetorical and commentary traditions to determine whether some developed notion of lyricism obtained in medieval poetics. The chapter then uses these medieval commentaries to identify a lyric hermeneutics at work within

¹⁸ Greentree 2001, 6.

Piers Plowman that dictates the manner in which the poem should be read.

Chapters three and four employ the interpretative strategies developed in the first half of the dissertation in order to perform readings of *Piers Plowman*'s lyricism. Chapter Three, "The Experiential 'I' and the Lyric Self," focuses on the medieval lyric's potential to create an experiential literature—a literature with which the audience personally identifies—and its importance to *Piers Plowman*'s idea of a moral poetics, which must be sensory in nature and impressed first upon the senses, or what the poem refers to as *kynde wit* (i.e. "natural understanding"). Chapter Four, "Lyric Re-performance," considers the re-enactment of Christ's Passion and Resurrection in the final *passūs* of *Piers Plowman*. Traditional portrayals of these events in medieval lyric encourage an emotional identification with Christ via an affective, first-hand portrayal of his suffering. Countless lyrics position the meditator at the foot of the cross, gazing, as the Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx counsels, "with the virgin mother and the virgin disciple. . . on his [Christ's] face suffused with pallor." This idea of experiencing what someone else has felt or thought or accomplished becomes the dominating ideology for Will's final vision in the poem via the incorporation of lyric motifs.

In investigating *Piers Plowman*'s lyricism, this dissertation is concerned primarily with the B-text of *Piers Plowman*. There is much to be said about lyricism and lyric inclusions in the A and C versions, and a good deal to be learned from a comparative study of lyricism across the three texts. Such avenues of inquiry, however, lie beyond

the scope of this dissertation, which, in the interests of length and concision, focuses on what is in many ways the version of *Piers Plowman* most interactive with medieval literary traditions.

References to all three texts of *Piers Plowman* are from the Athlone editions. All references to *Piers Plowman* in this dissertation, unless otherwise noted, are from B text.

Chapter One

Appraisals of the Lyric, Medieval and Modern

It is unlikely that William Wordsworth had the medieval lyric in mind when he identified the germ of all good poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”¹⁹ Although the description accords well with modern notions of the poetic genius who must think “long and deeply” on his or her own “influxes of feelings,” its relevance to the literature of late-medieval England and France is negligible. Few specimens of medieval lyric are clearly rooted in such authentic individual experience, and in fact, when such experiential claims do occur in medieval poetry, they usually signal not authenticity but poetic convention. In the *chanson d’aventure*, for instance, a popular lyric form important to *Piers Plowman*,²⁰ the speaker customarily claims to relate an authentic “adventure” that befell him the other day while walking by the way or riding in the woods. Such claims to authentic experience in medieval lyric are not genuine, but are in fact formulae that signal the poem’s fictitiousness. They alert the audience to the fact that what follows “is a literary event rather than an authoritative or factual discourse.”²¹ Like the nature introduction that prefaces troubadour song or such prevalent themes as *candet nudatum pectus* (“his bare breast shines”) in religious and meditative lyric, these poetic commonplaces demonstrate the medieval

¹⁹ Wordsworth 1974, 1:126.

²⁰ See the discussion in the Introduction above.

²¹ Middleton 1982a, 114.

lyricist's preference for convention over authentic experience.²² The result is a body of poetry that evinces not unique and distinctive expressions by which poets can be individuated, as in modern lyric, but rather an "ever-different" and frequently anonymous "variation on a basic pattern."²³ This chapter seeks first to uncover these "basic patterns" of medieval lyricism and then to investigate how medieval authors invoke and complicate lyric conventions by situating them within longer narrative poems. This phenomenon of lyric interpolation emerges in late-medieval English and French literature and provides the basis for our examination of the distinctive principles of poetic production at work in *Piers Plowman*.

Indeed, medieval lyrics are well worth studying in relation to longer species of literature in medieval culture because of another feature that *does* evoke Wordsworthian judgments and values: the idea of sentimental contemplation. For despite its spontaneous and subjective inception, poetry, Wordsworth insists, also requires contemplation. It "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that

²² The very same fondness that allowed Paul Zumthor 1992 to identify thirty typical expressions (*expressions typiques*) from Occitan poetry in just one of Peire Vidal's short *chansons*, 145. All citations from Zumthor's *Essai* in this dissertation are taken from Philip Bennett's 1992 English translation, although occasionally, as here, I will furnish the original French from the 2000 edition printed by Éditions du Seuil.

This is not to say that the corpus of medieval poetry is stagnant for all its common forms and themes. This dissertation will have occasion to investigate the variations and innovations that exist even in these rigid genres. Wimsatt 1991 argues, for instance, that innovation is not to be found in the themes and subjects of medieval poetry, but rather in its sound and language, 3-42.

²³ Jauss 1979, 189. For a useful introduction to the medieval lyric and its unique aesthetics, see the introduction to Woolf 1968. For more on repetition in medieval literature, see Haidu 1977.

which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.”²⁴ The idea of poetry as an intellectual or meditative experience has great relevance for the medieval lyric, which often contemplates the emotional significance of a singular event or moment, be it May birdsong or the crucified Christ. The emotional potential of such meditations can be glimpsed in the Harley lyricist’s somber reflections upon the Crucifixion scene at Calvary:

When y miselue stone
 ant wiþ myn ezen seo
 þurled fot ant honde
 wiþ grete nayles þreo—
 bloody wes hys heued,
 on him nes nout bileued
 þat wes of peynes freo—
 wel wel ohte myn herte
 for his loue to smerte
 ant sike ant sory beo²⁵

[When I myself stand and with my eyes see [his] foot and hand pierced with three great nails—bloody was his head, nothing was believed about him who was noble where suffering was concerned—well ought my heart ache for his love and sigh and be sorry]

Contemplation of the spectacle moves the lyric meditator, who imagines Christ’s crucifixion with such vividness that it is made present to him and evokes a new (and not recollected) emotional response.

In appreciating the value of sustained contemplation, we can begin to see how large narrative poems like *Piers Plowman* can be in some

²⁴ Wordsworth 1974, 1:148.

²⁵ Brook 1948, 54. For more on this lyric see Chapter Four.

sense lyrical. *Piers Plowman* contains a number of short lyric set pieces woven into its narrative that draw upon contemplative themes. As is typically the case with *Piers Plowman*'s presentation of material, some of these set pieces are repeated throughout the poem and re-presented at various stages of the narrative, creating a sustained sense of lyric engagement.

An example of *Piers Plowman*'s use of contemplative lyric is the portrayal of Christ's passion in the final *passūs* of the B-text. Although *Piers Plowman* is surprisingly sparse in its description of Christ's crucifixion, it does present a number of vignettes of Christ's experiences before and after Calvary. One of these depictions of Christ is drawn from Isaiah 63 (*Quis est iste, qui venit de Edom, tinctis vestibus de Bosra?* – "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bosra?"²⁶):

I fel eftsoones aslepe, and sodeynly me mette
 That Piers þe Plowman was peynted al blody
 And com in wiþ a cros bifore þe comune peple,
 And rist lik in all lymes to oure lord Iesu.
 And þanne called I Conscience to kenne me þe soþe:
 "Is þis Iesus þe Iustere", quod I, "þat Iewes dide to deþe?
 Or it is Piers þe Plowman? Who peynted hym so rede?"
 Quod Conscience and kneled þo, "þise arn Piers armes,
 Hise colours and his cote Armure; ac he þat comeþ so blody
 Is crist wiþ his cros, conquerour of cristene." (19.5-14)

The passage from Isaiah was a popular subject for meditation in medieval religious lyric. An example is the following poem from MS. Harley 7322, which begins:

²⁶ All Latin quotations of the Bible are taken from the Vulgata Clementia. All English translations are from the Douay-Rheims Bible.

Wat is he þis þat comet so brith
 Wit blodi cloþes al bedith?
 respondentes superiores dixerunt
 [*the elders, responding, said*]
 He is boþe god and man:
 Swilc ne sawe nevere nan.
 For adamis sinne he suffrede ded.
 And þerfore is his robe so red.²⁷

The passage in *Piers Plowman* literalizes the Trinitarian union of God and man presented in this lyric (“He is boþe god and man”) by conflating Christ with Piers the Plowman, two figures whom Will has some difficulty telling apart.

A closer analogue to Langland’s treatment of the Isaiah passage can be found in an early fourteenth-century lyric by Friar William Herebert, which begins,

“What ys he, thys lordling, that cometh vrom the vyht [*fight*]
 Wyth blod-rede wede so grysliche ydyht,
 So vayre ycoyntised [*fair appareled*], so semlich in syht,
 So styflyche yongeth [*stoutly marching*], so douhti a knyht?”
 “Ich hyt am, ich hyt am, that ne speke bote ryht,
 Chaumpyon to helen monkunde in vyht.”²⁸

The blood-red clothing of Isaiah 63 suggested for Herebert the popular lyric image of the Christ-knight, who conquers death for the sake of mankind. Langland makes use of this martial motif on a number of occasions, including the opening vision of Passus 18, which depicts Christ as an undubbed knight:

Oon semblable to þe Samaritan and somdeel to Piers þe
 Plowman
 Barefoot on an Asse bak bootles cam prikye

²⁷ Woolf 1962, 200, where Woolf discusses the use of Isaiah 63 in religious lyric in greater detail.

²⁸ Gray 1992, 38.

Wipouten spores oþer spere; spakliche he lokede
As is þe kynde of knyght þat comeþ to be dubbed,
To geten hym gilte spores and galoches ycouped. (18.10-4)

Here Christ has yet to receive his spurs, the symbol of his rank.

Where and when he will get his arms is unclear, but the religious lyric tradition suggests an answer, for another of its commonplaces compares Christ climbing the cross to a knight mounting his steed, as seen in the following excerpt from the *Towneley Play of the Crucifixion*:

Sir, commys heder and have done,
And wyn apon youre palfray sone,
ffor he is redy bowne.
If ye be bond till hym, be not wrote,
ffor be ye secure we were full lothe
On any wyse that ye fell downe.²⁹

In this example, the soldiers who fix Christ to the cross become squires who arm him for battle, and instruments of torture are transformed into the implements by which Christ achieves victory. This is the confrontation that stains Christ's clothing, from which Will spies "crist wip his cros" returning triumphantly in Passus 19.

The point of these and similar treatments of Christ's passion in medieval lyric is to inspire pious thoughts in the meditator. As did the Harley lyricist cited above, Herebert closes his poem by modeling for its audience the proper moral response to its depiction of Christ's suffering:

On Godes mylsfolnesse ich wole bythenche me,
And heryen hym in all thyng that he yeldeth me.³⁰

²⁹ Woolf 1962, 55. Woolf also quotes a complaint from MS. Harley 2316: "Mi palefrey is of tre / wiht nayles naylede þurh me. / Ne is more sorwe to se— / certes noon more no may be" (54).

³⁰ Gray 1992, 38.

[I will think on God's mercifulness and praise him in all things
that he grants me]

Piers Plowman, however, is not so explicit in guiding the audience's reactions to its portrayals of Christ. Though the poem offers vivid images of Christ's suffering and triumph, they rarely culminate in sentimental contemplation on the part of Will, who functions as our proxy within the poem. Instead, the portrayal of the Christ-knight in Passus 18 gives way to a depiction of Christ's harrowing of hell. Similarly, the lyric passage from Passus 19 fails to inspire in Will the pious response modeled by Herebert, culminating instead in a lecture from Conscience on the significance of the word "Christ." Rarely do we see Will meditate upon such marvels.

This brief survey of a lyric series in *Piers Plowman* might seem to suggest that the poem fails to capitalize on the affective potential of these contemplative scenes, avoiding sentimental meditation in lieu of Langland's preferred expository modes, such as debate. But such a claim overlooks the degree to which these lyric moments disrupt the course of the narrative and direct, through the vividness of their imagery, the *passūs*' subsequent contemplation and discussion. Christ's activity is more than a mere backdrop to the movement of *Piers Plowman*'s final *passūs*. His brief but striking appearances impact the narrative sufficiently to redirect its course. Though they might fail to generate an obvious affective response in Will, these interpolations mold the final *passūs* into an extended and multifaceted meditation on the passion of Christ and the redemption of humanity.

Sentimental contemplation is not the sole lyric feature that can be adapted to long poems such as *Piers Plowman*. But before we can identify other potentially extendable aspects of lyric, we must first stress what the different examples above have already made clear: medieval culture produced very different kinds of short poetry, and there is thus a range of potential definitions of “lyricism.” If we are to speak of lyricism as a definable quality in medieval literature, we must first understand what a lyric poem is in the Middle Ages and how it might differ from our modern, Wordsworthian notions of lyricism. To accomplish this task, we will first review the idea of the lyric as it is articulated in modern scholarship before returning to our consideration of the lyricism of longer poetic forms such as *Piers Plowman*.

The central difficulty in creating a universal or transhistorical definition of the lyric and lyricism is that the questions we ask ourselves in order to isolate the genre occasion different answers with every literary period and tradition.³¹ What distinguishes the lyric from other genres of poetry, such as romance, epic, or narrative? And are such categories mutually exclusive? What properties or formal characteristics classify a poem or an excerpt from a longer work as “lyrical”? Are certain *topoi* and themes particularly endemic to (and therefore characteristic of) the lyric mode? And more specifically for

³¹ Regarding Middle English literature, the important and pioneering efforts of editors such as Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins in the first half of the 20th century have done much to create a recognized corpus of lyric poetry; but it is important to remember that this corpus, as envisioned by Brown and Robbins, was the product of deliberate editorial decisions and not necessarily reflective of medieval notions of genre.

the present study, is the lyric only a modern classification, or was it a recognized mode or category for medieval and other authors?

Answers to these and similar questions isolate specific differences among historical literary corpora, thereby producing, more often than not, descriptions of specific lyrical kinds within a particular period rather than a comprehensive, diachronic definition of the larger category as a whole.³² For instance, the performative fusion of song, chorus, and dance that characterizes Greek lyric is altogether absent from late Middle English confessional lyric, which was intended instead for private meditation, unlike the troubadour poems of southern France, which were performed publicly.³³ Differences such as these in structure, theme, performance, and occasion disassociate the works of each lyrical tradition from the others and threaten the genre's outward show of homogeneity.

Such discrepancies, however, need not indicate that all lyric poetry lacks a certain unity or cohesion. W. R. Johnson, for instance, insists in *The Idea of Lyric* that the lyric genre is "immutable and universal. Its accidents may and always do show extraordinary variations as it unfolds in time, but its substance abides."³⁴ But if the lyric is in fact a universal category, it is nonetheless unclear how we are to isolate its abiding and persistent substance across a multitude of literary periods and traditions.

³² See Johnson 1993, 714.

³³ Woolfe 1968, 3-4. Patterson 1911, 1-20. For Greek lyric's connection with performance, see W. R. Johnson 1982, 26ff.

³⁴ W. R. Johnson 1982, 2.

Scholars have nevertheless proposed a number of candidates for the immutable substance of lyric, the most frequently-cited of which is perhaps musical expression. James William Johnson suggests in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* that lyric's

irreducible denominator. . . must. . . comprise those elements which it shares with the musical forms that produced it. Although lyric poetry is not music, it is representative of music in its sound patterns, basing its meter and rhyme on the regular linear measure of the song; or, more remotely, it employs cadence and consonance to approximate the tonal variation of a chant or intonation. Thus the lyric retains structural or substantive evidence of its melodic origins, and this factor serves as the categorical principle of poetic lyricism.³⁵

But even if lyric poetry preserves at least vestiges of anterior musical forms (an assertion founded upon the assumption that all lyric shares a common or at least parallel development), rhythm and musical cadence alone might not sufficiently qualify a work as lyric (or lyrical). Johnson concedes that, although

drama and epic may also have had their genesis in a spontaneously melodic expression which adapted itself to a ritual need and thus became formalized, music in dramatic and epic poetry was at best secondary to other elements, being mainly a mimetic or mnemonic device. In the case of lyric, however, the musical element is intrinsic to the work intellectually as well as aesthetically.³⁶

Thus according to Johnson's historical reconstruction, music is more fundamental to the nature of lyric poetry than is the case with other genres. Even in those traditions that had, over time, long since

³⁵ Johnson 1993, 714-15.

³⁶ Ibid., 713.

abandoned music or accompaniment, a formalized “musical element” persists that is essential to the lyric form.

Scholars of medieval literature have similarly posited musical origins as the source for the formal similarities among the set of poems classified as lyrics. For instance, Peter Dronke emphasizes the importance of music and performance (as well as the influence of ancient Greek and Roman poetic corpora) to the medieval lyric by commencing his pioneering book on the subject with a review of the Greek and Roman musical traditions inherited by medieval Europe: “The lyrical repertoire that was largely shared by all medieval Europe, and which we can trace back in its essential features and in many points of detail to not long after the year 1000, is thus the product of ancient and scarcely separable traditions of courtly, clerical, and popular song.”³⁷ For Dronke, the medieval lyric’s genesis in musical traditions is as essential to its character as its dependence on classical examples of the genre, with which, he affirms, the medieval lyric forms a seamless continuity.

Yet if we, like Johnson and Dronke, were to understand music as the persistent and abiding substance of the lyric, we would be in danger of excluding a number of short poetic forms from the genre. Although a substantial number of the medieval lyrics analyzed by Dronke and others do in fact have extant melodies or obvious musical influences, there nevertheless remains a host of recognized lyrics with less obvious musical affinities. To be sure, some medieval lyric was written to be sung. Notable examples of lyric with musical

³⁷ Dronke 1996, 30.

compositions exist, such as the substantial corpus produced by the troubadours, *trobairitz*, and *trouvères* of southern and northern France who set their poems to melodies both new and borrowed. A number of songs survive in both Latin and English as well, ranging from troubadour-like love laments to drinking and feasting songs. In addition, some religious lyrics, such as hymns (“Criste qui lux es et Dies” and “Ave Maris stella” being popular examples³⁸) or the Latin songs written by the monk Gottschalk in the ninth century, were sometimes sung or given polyphonic settings.³⁹ Numerous medieval lyrics and carols also exhibit other features, such as refrains, that likely originate from musical and dance forms. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the extant corpus of medieval lyric poetry, including the considerable body of Middle English meditative and penitential poetry from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, lacked musical accompaniment and was intended not to be sung or chanted, but read, often silently or subvocally. Nor do all of the poems in this subset of lyric demonstrate any obvious affinities with classical poetry. These lyrics, in addition to a number of longer epic poems and narratives with sophisticated metrical structures “representative of music,” complicate any attempt to define lyric poetry solely by virtue of its musical qualities.

Typological difficulties such as these could indicate that the “lyric” label simply covers a range of poetry too broad to be subsumed under one genre, even within the relatively narrow sphere of late-medieval

³⁸ Robbins 1954.

³⁹ Woolf 1968, 3. Dronke 1996, 32ff.

English and French literature. Yet if we turn from music to a consideration of other aspects of form and content, the diverse body of medieval lyric begins to attain a measure of coherence. Though Dronke never offers a concrete definition of the medieval lyric in his study, his readings of select texts suggest a number of additional thematic and structural criteria for lyric membership besides musical origins, including the “passionate emotion” absent from nonlyrical music forms (such as Ambrose’s hymns, which are early ancestors of the medieval lyric) and the strophic structure of the sequence, which was later adapted for other lyric varieties.⁴⁰ To judge from Dronke’s commentary, the lyric is essentially a song or short poem that contains sophisticated imagery and language (“figural interrelations,” and a “richness of thought and imagery”) and often a personal, subjective mode of address, or “individuality of thought,” by which it is distinguished from other varieties of medieval poetry and song.⁴¹ Ann Haskell broadens this classification in her study of lyrics in Chaucer. Medieval lyrics, she claims, are, “with greater frequency than other medieval poetry, short; they generally have a tighter metrical pattern than, say, the romance; they are more frequently stanzaic than longer, narrative medieval poems; their rhyme scheme is more complex, in general, than that of narrative or dramatic poetry (although both the Wakefield master’s works and the *Troilus* are exceptions which immediately present themselves); and they are frequently celebratory or plaintive, though they can be didactic or practical.”⁴² None of the

⁴⁰ Dronke 1996, 32-3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34-6.

⁴² Haskell 1972, 4.

characteristics suggested by Dronke or Haskell is sufficient in itself to identify a lyric, although a majority of recognized medieval lyrics exhibit one or more of these properties. Nor are some of these characteristics limited to lyric: Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, as Haskell reminds us, exhibits a complicated rhyme scheme and tight stanzaic structure but is too long and largely too narrative in tone to be considered a lyric according to our modern typology, whereas some medieval poems identified as lyrics do not rhyme at all or even lack clear stanzaic divisions.

In order to test the validity of these alternative criteria for medieval lyricism, let us turn to a consideration of another fourteenth-century narrative poem, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Although evidently written in the later 1380s and so after the first two (if not all three) versions of *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer's poem provides a pertinent—and better-known—instance of the utility of the lyric for English long narrative poems. By analyzing the passages in the *Troilus* that scholars customarily consider to be lyric interpolations, we can isolate not only those qualities that distinguish lyric from narrative, but also consider how a late fourteenth-century narrative incorporates and makes use of lyric conventions.

Perhaps the most lyrical passages in *Troilus and Criseyde* are the songs performed by the characters Troilus and Antigone, which on four occasions arrest the sequential progression of the poem's plot. Aside from the fact that the narrative describes these interpolated texts as sung performances, however, there is little formally to distinguish these songs from the framing poem, since they maintain

its rhyme royal stanzaic structure. The songs contain no consistent musical or metrical element that the rest of Chaucer's poem lacks: were it not for the narrative description of these performances by Troilus and Antigone, we might never have suspected that these passages were sung.

Despite the structural uniformity between these performed texts and the framing narrative, however, the fact that they are introduced in the text as "songs" nevertheless suggests a self-conscious use of a poetic discourse that, for want of a better term, scholars have identified as lyric. This classification is enforced by the songs' consistent rubrication in the margins of the manuscripts as "Cantus" or "Canticus Troili," labels which recognize these insertions as a discourse distinct from the surrounding narrative.⁴³ A closer inspection of the songs contained in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the properties that distinguish them from the framing narrative will thus be of some service to our investigation of the lyric and its compatibility with long forms of medieval poetry.

Troilus' second song, a celebration of his first night with Criseyde, commences with the following narrative prelude:

And by the hond ful ofte he wolde take
This Pandarus, and into gardyn lede,
And swich a feste and swich a proces make
Hym of Criseyde, and of hire wommanhede,
And of hire beaute, that withouten drede
It was an hevene his wordes for to here;
And thanne he wolde synge in this manere:

[*Canticus Troili.*]

⁴³ For a more detailed discussion of Chaucer's interpolated lyrics, see Boffey 1993.

“Love, that of erthe and se hath governaunce,
Love, that his hestes hath in hevene hye,
Love, that with an holsom alliaunce
Halt peples joyned, as hym lest hem gye,
Love, that knetteth lawe of compaignie,
And couples doth in vertu for to dwelle,
Bynd this acord, that I have told and telle.

“That, that the world with feith which that is stable
Diverseth so his stowndes concordynge,
That elementz that ben so discordable
Holden a bond perpetuely durynge,
That Phebus mote his rosy day forth brynge,
And that the mone hath lordshipe over the nyghtes:
Al this doth Love, ay heried be his myghtes!” (III.1737-57)⁴⁴

The metrical hammer strokes of the repeated word “Love” notwithstanding, Troilus’ *canticus*, drawing its imagery from Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae*, slips easily into the narrative’s regular rhythms and maintains its rhyme royal patterning. The result is a lyric song lacking a melodic expression distinct from that of the framing narrative; its sole claim to a unique musical form is the fact that Troilus actually sings it. Only the anaphora and consequent initial stress in Troilus’ opening invocation of Love signal the commencement of his lyric utterance and a break from the rhythms of Chaucer’s *sorwful tale*.

But this anaphora does not extend past the first of the song’s five lines and is therefore not characteristic of the entire lyric. Other rhetorical *colores* and amplificatory devices in addition to repetition appear throughout Troilus’s three songs, including *commutatio* (“For

⁴⁴ This and all subsequent passages from *Troilus and Criseyde* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer* (Chaucer 1987), edited by Larry Benson.

hote of cold, for cold of hote, I dye" I.420), *subiectio* ("Allas, what is this wondre maladie?" I.419), and *translatio*, or metaphor ("O sterre, of which I lost have al the light, / With herte soor wel oughte I to biwaille / That evere derk in torment, nyght by nyght, / Toward my deth with wynd in steere I saille" V.638-42). But according to medieval preceptive grammars and their sources, such rhetorical embellishments were not the sole property of brief poetic forms. Geoffrey of Vinsauf's early thirteenth-century *Poetria nova*, which assembles a considerable list of stylistic and amplificatory devices (gleaned mostly from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*), concerns itself exclusively with "the style and structure considered proper to poetic narrative" and not with what we would today classify as lyric (although that is not to say that Geoffrey's advice could not have been applied to short, nonnarrative verse forms).⁴⁵ John of Garland shortly afterwards reinforced the broad applicability of such devices in his *Parisiana poetria* (c. 1240), which instructs its readers on the proper use of such *ornatus facilis* and *ornatus difficilis* in a wide variety of written modes arranged under the triumvirate of *ars dictaminis*, or letter writing; *ars prosaica*, or prose that lacks metrical rules; and *ars rhythmica*, a species of music common to liturgical hymns and sequences.⁴⁶ All of

⁴⁵ Murphy 2001, 30.

⁴⁶ *Alia rithmus, quo utimur in prosis ecclesiasticis. Sed notandum quod rithmica species est musice, ut ait Boetius in Arte Musica.* [Another is *rhythmus*, which we use in the "proses" or sequences of the liturgy. But note that the rhythmic is a species of music, as Boethius says in his *Art of Music*]. John of Garland 1974, 6-7 (edited by Traugott Lawler). For more discussion, see Chapter Two of this dissertation. All English translations of John of Garland in this chapter are Lawler's.

these written modes can contain *qualitas carminis* or, literally, “quality of song,” a phrase John of Garland uses to describe poetic style.⁴⁷

Regardless of their broader use throughout medieval literature or the prescriptions of the *artes poetriae*, figures of rhetoric are highly concentrated in Troilus’s poems. Although none of these devices is common only to the lyric songs in *Troilus and Criseyde*, they nevertheless tend to concentrate in non-narrative passages such as the songs and proems. Both Troilus’s *cantica* and Chaucer’s *prohemes*, for instance, frequently employ apostrophe, a device of *amplificatio* that also infiltrates spoken dialogue throughout the narrative. For Jonathan Culler, the lyric moment is embodied best by the apostrophe, which creates a sense of stasis in opposition to the sequential progression of the narrative story:

But if one puts into a poem thou shepherd boy, ye blessed creatures, ye birds, they are immediately associated with what might be called a timeless present but is better seen as a temporality of writing. Even if the birds were only glimpsed once in the past, to apostrophize them as “ye birds” is to locate them in the time of the apostrophe—a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say “now.” This is a time of discourse rather than story. So located by apostrophes, birds, creatures, boys, etc., resist being organized into events that can be narrated. . . . Such considerations suggest that one distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic, and that the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic.⁴⁸

According to Culler’s analysis, lyric time is confined to the present moment. Whereas the narrative poem typically focuses on plot and objectively describes a sequence of events that unfolds in time, the

⁴⁷ See John of Garland 1974, 230, n.122.

⁴⁸ Culler 1981, 148-9.

lyric dwells on objects more pertinent to the “timeless present,” such as a singular moment, thought, or sensation. Northrop Frye refers to this quality as a turning “away from our ordinary continuous experience in space or time, or rather a verbal mimesis of it.”⁴⁹

But James William Johnson would here caution us against placing too much emphasis on qualities such as stasis, subjectivity, and emotional power as definitive of the lyric genre, for

critical attempts to define lyric poetry by reference to its secondary (i.e. nonmusical) qualities have suffered by being descriptive of various historical groupings of lyrics rather than definitive of the category as a whole . . . Though the attributes of brevity, metrical coherence, subjectivity, passion, sensuality, and particularity of image are frequently ascribed to the lyric, there are schools of poetry obviously lyric which are not susceptible to such criteria.⁵⁰

Though Johnson’s admonition is certainly reasonable, the structural unity of Chaucer’s poem presents us with a quandary: although Troilus’ poems are indeed sung, they manifest no clearly musical properties that the framing narrative lacks. On the grounds of melodic expression and structural consistency, we might therefore also understand the whole of *Troilus and Criseyde* as a lyric—one over 8000 lines in length and largely narrative in tone.

James Wimsatt’s book, *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries*—one of the more recent and important contributions to the intertextual study of medieval English and French poetry—has investigated the relationship between *Troilus*’ musical properties and its lyrical

⁴⁹ Frye 1985, 31.

⁵⁰ Johnson 1993, 714.

passages. Using Eustache Deschamps' distinction between the melodic properties of music (*musique artificiele*) and spoken verse (*musique naturele*), Wimsatt argues that "sound is privileged above other features" in Middle French poetry and its later English derivatives. The sounds of poetry—its rhythms, rhymes, stress, etc.—describe a "natural music" that is in fact the primary source of signification in medieval poetry. "Other poetic modes do not similarly foreground sound," Wimsatt claims, because only in medieval poetry is the content so highly conventional and formulaic as to be nearly divested of relevance: "The meanings carried by the words—by the sentences of the text—will tend to abstraction and frequently be repetitive. In this fashion both syntax and sense become an adjunct to the patterns of the sound."⁵¹

This subordination of content to sound in medieval poetry is not, however, absolute. Wimsatt's attempts to ground an account of meaning on sound patterns occasionally result in a recourse back to content. His reading of the Harley lyric "Ichot a burde in boure bright," for instance, treats versification as a means of emphasizing lexical meaning:

In this English lyric almost every important word—the nouns, adjectives, and verbs that carry major lexical meaning—is pointed up either by alliteration or by rhyme. Since the alliteration consistently falls on the first letter of the stems, and the rhymes are mostly parts of monosyllabic stems, they serve to emphasize the semantic content and to bind the phonetic systems of the verse to the meaning.⁵²

⁵¹ Wimsatt 1991, 12, 16.

⁵² Ibid., 19.

In this analysis it is difficult to determine whether the semantic or the phonetic systems are ascendant: the claim that *almost* every important word is emphasized “either by alliteration or by rhyme” suggests that the significance of at least a few words has been previously determined by some means other than the poem’s structural properties. It would therefore appear that more than one major system of signification is at work within the poem, and that, among these, the phonetic is not dominant but supplementary. As far as generic classifications are concerned, the “natural music” of the poem’s versification is only of little use, as the following admission from the book’s final pages reveals:

Although I have conducted this discussion as if the technical features of versification are all that enter into the question of natural music, it must be acknowledged that the content of the work surely has a bearing. In his *Art de dictier* Deschamps could leave questions of content to his examples because the poetry of the formes fixes is virtually all lyric in nature. While it is not all love poetry, it is discontinuous, discursive, and reflective rather than narrative. Accordingly, the content and the treatment of content in *Troilus and Criseyde* make it possible to classify large parts of lyric. By contrast, most of the rhyme royal of the *Canterbury Tales* cannot be so classified.⁵³

This belated acknowledgment of the taxonomical utility of content provides an explanation for Wimsatt’s earlier identification of “fifty-six developed lyric passages” in *Troilus and Criseyde*, “amounting to 1,532 lines (of 8,238) essentially non-narrative, which might, with moderate alteration, be made into separate lyrics closely related to the formes fixes.”⁵⁴ Although for Wimsatt certain structural properties are

⁵³ Ibid., 289-90.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 36. Wimsatt explores the *Troilus*’ lyric insertions and their French sources

necessary for lyric membership, they are not sufficient. What truly distinguishes the lyric from other formally complex poetic types is content: the very aspect of the poem that tends towards repetition and abstraction.

Though such secondary qualities as discontinuity, discursiveness, and subjectivity might be, as Johnson warns, merely descriptive of lyric in the medieval period and not inherent to the genre as a transhistorical whole, they nevertheless provide us with avenues of exploration that can potentially deepen our understanding of lyricism and its interceptions with narrative poetry in late medieval literature. What is more, any cursory examination of lyric scholarship in other literary periods reveals the sustained relevance of these very characteristics. What follows is an attempt to apply these contentual properties to a representative sample of medieval lyric interpolated within a longer poem—namely the songs of *Troilus* and *Antigone*—in order to generate a better understanding of lyric and lyricism that will be of some service in our investigation of *Piers Plowman*'s lyricism.

When Wimsatt first isolates the lyric passages of *Troilus and Criseyde*, he refers to them as “non-narrative”: that is, lacking the sequential progression of time common to narrative poetry. This non-sequential quality is also recalled in his use of the word “discontinuous,” a label which he borrows from Northrop Frye. Frye describes lyric discontinuity as a turning away “from our ordinary continuous experience in space or time, or rather from a verbal

in greater detail in Wimsatt 1985.

mimesis of it.”⁵⁵ Time in the lyric is not continuous but static: a “timeless present,” to recall Culler, “of discourse rather than story.”⁵⁶

In the world of medieval lyric, however, a blending of sequence and stasis is not unusual. Medieval lyrics on occasion forfeit their “timeless presents” to narrate stories, reminding us once more that no single criterion for lyric is universally applicable. Peter Dronke, in his essay “On the Continuity of Medieval English Love-Lyric,” declares the medieval hybrid of narrative and lyric to be an “inbuilt enigma” that compromises the emotional content and, by extension, the stasis that is typical of lyric, for “such [narrative] details imply a progression of events, and are thus often in tension with the more purely emotional features [of lyric], which tend towards stasis.”⁵⁷ But whereas Dronke sees the intrusion of narrative sequentiality into lyric as detrimental to its emotional force, Ann Haskell associates medieval lyric narrativity with the subjective reflection fitting for emotional rumination: “Most medieval lyrics are not narrative, though they may contain skeletal plots; when narrative progression does occur in the lyric, it is usually as an objective entity for subjective reaction.”⁵⁸ For both Haskell and Dronke, then, the subjective and reflective features of lyric would seem to be imperative, although Haskell maintains that since all temporalities are ultimately subordinated to lyric subjectivity, sequentiality can actually enhance lyric reflection. Rosemary Woolf, on the other hand, understands the integration of stasis and sequence

⁵⁵ Frye 1985, 31.

⁵⁶ Culler 1981, 149.

⁵⁷ Dronke 1990, 13-14.

⁵⁸ Haskell 1972, 4.

in religious lyric as not quite so disruptive of lyric timelessness: “lyrics are never purely narrative; though in the later lyrics there is often a sequence of action, there is always a single and static situation, consisting of the relationship between two people. A few lyrics are dramatic: Christ and Mary speak to one another, or the Body argues with the Soul. But more often they are, as it were, one-half of a dialogue, in which the meditator addresses Christ or Christ addresses the meditator.”⁵⁹ Therefore lyrics never achieve the sequentiality of a true narrative or dramatic work despite their incorporation of skeletal plots or partial dialogues. For Woolf, as with Culler, the timeless present remains the identifying characteristic of lyric expression.

We can trace this friction between sequence and stasis, between subjective and objective content, at the margins of Troilus’s songs where lyric intercepts narrative. Between Chaucer’s descriptions of the moment of composition and the actual lyrics themselves lies the boundary between narrative and lyric time expression, the shift from reporting to feeling, from story to discourse, from progression to stasis. By subjectifying the passions described by the narrative, Troilus’s songs transform them into lyric sentiment while simultaneously arresting the course of Chaucer’s tale. We may turn here from literary scholarship to philosophical appraisals. In his lectures on aesthetic theory, G. W. F. Hegel contrasts this particularly emotional and personal lyric tone with the sequential progression of the epic:

In these sorts of lyric the form of the whole is, on the one hand, narrative, because what is reported is the origin and progress of

⁵⁹ Woolf 1968, 5.

a situation and event, a turning-point in the fate of a nation, etc. But, on the other hand, the fundamental tone is wholly lyric, because the chief thing is not the non-subjective description and painting of a real occurrence, but on the contrary the poet's mode of apprehending and feeling it, the mood resounding through the whole, whether it be a mood of joy or lament, courage or submission, and consequently the effect which such a poem was meant to produce belongs entirely to the sphere of lyric. This is the case because what the poet aims at producing in his hearer is the same mood which has been created in him by the event related and which he has therefore introduced entirely into his poem. He expresses his depression, his melancholy, his cheerfulness, his glow of patriotism, etc., in an analogous event in such a way that the centre of the thing is not the occurrence itself but the state of mind which is mirrored in it. For this reason, after all, he principally emphasizes, and describes with depth of feeling, only those traits which re-echo and harmonize with his inner emotion and which, by expressing that emotion in the most living way, are best able to arouse in the listener the same feeling.⁶⁰

Whereas Hegel here describes lyric/epic hybrids that recount narrative events in sequence, Chaucer's poem does not combine the two genres in this manner so much as about them. The greater part of *Troilus and Criseyde* is narrative and therefore largely concerns itself with the progression of events. But in moments of serious emotional import when the narrative pace is slowed in order to focus on the subjective feelings that foreground the larger tale, Chaucer slips into the "mode of apprehending and feeling" of lyric by maneuvering Troilus or another character into the role of composer and enabling him or her to communicate thoughts and feelings directly to the audience. It is therefore not Troilus who introduces or describes the event that triggers his emotional response; rather, that is the role of the narrative

⁶⁰ Hegel 1975, 2:1116.

voice of Chaucer's poem. Troilus merely responds in song to the action that occurs within the framing narrative.

In Hegel's terms, we can see the triumph of the *state of mind* over the *occurrence* itself in Troilus's songs, each of which reflects the current status of his relationship with Criseyde without describing explicitly the actual factual details. His second song, as we saw earlier, is a celebration of his first night with Criseyde but reveals little of what actually occurred between the two; rather, the song exhorts Love to hold fast his sway over lovers, a request that reveals simultaneously Troilus's thrill of success in love and fear of losing it. Troilus's first song in book I (I.400-420), an imitation of a Petrarchan sonnet,⁶¹ is also born from his feelings for Criseyde, although this time they are a mingling of love-longing and sorrow:

And over al this, yet muchel more he thoughte
What for to speke, and what to holden inne;
And what to arten hire to love he soughte,
And on a song anon-right to bygynne,
And gan loude on his sorwe for to wyne;
For with good hope he gan fully assente
Criseyde for to love, and nought repente.

[*Canticus Troili.*]

"If no love is, O God, what fele I so?
And if love is, what thing and which is he?
If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?
If it be wikke, a wonder thynketh me,
When every torment and adversite
That cometh of hym may to me savory thinke,
For ay thurst I, the more that ich it drynke.

"And if that at myn owen lust I brenne,
From whennes cometh my waillynge and my pleynte?

⁶¹ See Thomson 1959.

If harm agree me, wherto pleyne I thenne?
I noot, ne whi unwery that I feynte.
O quike deth, O swete harm so queynte,
How may of the in me swich quantite,
But if that I consente that it be?

“And if that I consente, I wrongfully
Compleynte, iwis. Thus possed to and fro,
Al sterelees withinne a boot am I
Amydde the see, bitwixen wyndes two,
That in contrarie stonden evere mo.
Allas, what is this wondre maladie?
For hote of cold, for cold of hote, I dye.” (I.393-420)

Here Chaucer’s narrative objectively describes the very fears and uncertainties that Troilus in turn shapes and expands (but does not explicitly recount) into his own subjective lament. The poem essentially offers us two perspectives on the same situation, as narrative description gives way to Troilus’s personal rumination and poetic expression, in which he, in the manner of Woolf’s “one-half of a dialogue,” rhetorically probes and attempts to apprehend the cause of his suffering.

But lyric poetry need not be purely reactive. As we shall see, the lyric intercalations in Chaucer’s *Troilus* can be as active as they are reactive. Instead of providing a space merely for personal reflection, the *cantūs* of Troilus and Antigone can draw upon the unique properties of lyric in order to effect a change in the narrative’s sequence. As an example of the influence that the static lyric moment can exert on its framing narrative, let us turn to Troilus’ third song in book V after Criseyde has left Troy:

For which hym likede in his songes shewe
Th’ennesoun of his wo, as he best myghte;

And made a song of wordes but a few,
Somwhat his woful herte for to lighte;
And whan he was from every mannes syghte,
With softe vois he of his lady deere,
That absent was, gan synge as ye may heere.

[*Canticus Troili.*]

“O sterre, of which I lost have al the light,
With herte soor wel oughte I to biwaille
That evere derk in torment, nyght by nyght,
Toward my deth with wynd in steere I saille;
For which the tenthe nyght, if that I faille,
The gydyng of thi bemes bright an houre,
My ship and me Caribdis wol devoure.”

This song whan he thus songen hadde, soone
He fil ayeyn into his sikes olde; (V.631-646)

In this particular song, Troilus, who is alone, slips into apostrophe, voicing his despair to the “star” that is Criseyde. Insofar as Troilus sings literally to a star, his song resembles W. R. Johnson’s category of the meditative lyric, “in which the poet talks to himself or to no one in particular or, sometimes, calls on, apostrophizes, inanimate or nonhuman entities, abstractions, or the dead. In this category, the person or thing addressed, when it exists, is often no more than a focusing device, an object of meditation.”⁶² But when we consider the metaphorical weight of Troilus’s star in the narrative context—its transparent symbolism for Criseyde—the ode to an inanimate object becomes a vocative address to a distant love: an *amor de lonh*, a lady as absent and silent as a troubadour’s *domna*. In this sense, the song becomes an example of another of Johnson’s lyric categories, which he calls the “I-You” or pronominal category,

⁶² W. R. Johnson 1982, 3.

in which the poet addresses or pretends to address his thoughts and feelings to another person. . . . This pronominal patterning (*ego-tu, ego-vos*) I take to be the classic form for lyric solo, or, as the Greeks came to call it, monody. . . . What concerns me in this category is a speaker, or singer, talking to, singing to, another person or persons, often, but not always, at a highly dramatic moment in which the essence of their relationship, of their “story,” reveals itself in the singer’s lyrical discourse, in his praise or blame, in the metaphors he finds to recreate the emotions he seeks to describe.⁶³

What is in question for Johnson’s two categories is the lyric’s ability to enact a discourse. Whereas the meditative lyricist speaks to an entity that cannot reply, the singer of the pronominal lyric produces a discursive scene by engaging another (perhaps absent) person in dialogue: someone who could potentially (but does not always) reply to the lyric utterance.

Troilus’s song mingles together both varieties of lyric—the meditative and the pronominal—to produce a poem that is both an introspection and a conversation. But it is only when situated in the context of the framing narrative that we can understand the lyric as a discursive event. Were we to separate the lyric from the dramatic/narrative context of Chaucer’s poem, we would read it literally as a solo performance and species of Johnson’s meditative lyric in which the speaker remains isolated and unidentified. The framing narrative, however, alters the lyric moment and the nature of the singer’s performance, grounding it in a larger context that produces an alternate reading. The star, the silent object of Troilus’s

⁶³ Ibid., 3.

lyric, is in fact his estranged love, and the song, in Johnson's terms, therefore reveals "the essence of their relationship."

Yet interpolation within a narrative context, Culler argues, is not the only way to produce a discursive reading of an otherwise meditative lyric. For the apostrophe is an attempt on the singer's part to establish a relationship with an inanimate object: "We might posit, then, a . . . level of reading where the vocative of apostrophe is a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him. The object is treated as a subject, an I which implies a certain type of you in its turn. One who successfully invokes nature is one to whom nature might, in its turn, speak."⁶⁴ Thus Culler's model produces a discursive scene without the benefit of a framing narrative, for apostrophe anticipates a response from its object.

Using this interpretative model, we can develop our reading of Troilus's song and its lyric qualities even further. By willing the star to answer his plea, Troilus is simultaneously reaching across the gulf that separates him from Criseyde to demand a response, to make her a speaking subject: one whose existence defines his own and without which he will die. He is attempting to create discourse, to move from "one-half of a dialogue" to a mutual exchange in an attempt to preserve himself. "What is really in question," states Culler, "is the power of poetry to make something happen."⁶⁵ One could argue that Troilus's lyric is thus not only a reflection of narrative events, but also

⁶⁴ Culler 1981, 142.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 140.

an attempt to manipulate those events, to exercise his personal desires on the objective story unfolding around him: in effect, to *leave* the lyric discourse.

Not all lyric poetry is spoken into a void or to a silent object, however, and often in a narrative context the lyric is heard and received by characters who respond to its sentiments. As an example of such audience participation from *Troilus and Criseyde*, let us consider Antigone's song to Criseyde from book II (vv. 827-75). As with Troilus's lyrics, Antigone's poem is carefully signaled as a self-contained work, being introduced in the narrative as a "song" (despite its opening words "she seyde") and rubricated in manuscripts as "Cantus Antigone."⁶⁶ The narrative's careful demarcations of Antigone's song, reinforced by the Latin gloss, once more identify this short composition as a part of the same discrete, poetic discourse to which Troilus's songs belonged. The first four stanzas of the song read as follows:

Til at the laste Antigone the shene
Gan on a Troian song to singen cleere,
That it an heven was hire vois to here.

She seyde, "O Love, to whom I have and shal
Ben humble subgit, trewe in myn entente,
As I best kan, to you, lord, yeve ich al
For everemo myn hertes lust to rente;
For nevere yet thi grace no wight sente
So blisful cause as me, my lif to lede
In alle joie and seurte out of drede.

"Ye, blisful god, han me so wel byset
In love, iwys, that al that bereth lif

⁶⁶ Boffey 1993, 19.

Ymagynen ne koute how to be bet;
For, lord, withouten jalousie or strif,
I love oon which is moost ententif
To serven wel, unweri or unfeyned,
That evere was, and leest with harm desteyned.

“As he that is the welle of worthynesse,
Of trouthe grownd, mirour of goodlihed,
Of wit Apollo, stoon of sikernesse,
Of vertu roote, of lust fynder and hed,
Thorugh which is alle sorwe fro me ded –
Iwis, I love hym best, so doth he me;
Now good thrift have he, wherso that he be!

“Whom shulde I thanken but you, god of Love,
Of al this blisse, in which to bathe I gynne?
And thanked be ye, lord for that I love!
This is the righte lif that I am inne,
To flemen alle manere vice and synne:
This dooth me so to vertu for t’entende,
That day by day I in my wille amende....” (II.824-54)

Although Antigone’s song is prompted by general happenings in the framing narrative (namely Pandarus’s disclosure of Troilus’s love to Criseyde), its discourse is not rooted in any specific event. Like Troilus’s songs, it shuns explicit descriptions of particulars, thereby attaining a measure of universal applicability. But unlike Troilus’s compositions, Antigone’s song is completely ambiguous: it is unclear even within the context of the framing narrative whether Antigone is the author or merely the performer of the lyric and whether the song is a description of her own personal experiences. This dichotomy between *assertio* and *recitatio*, between asserting as an *auctor* and repeating as a *compiler*, was not unrecognized in the Middle Ages,⁶⁷ as Dante affirms in his *De vulgari eloquentia* (II.viii):

⁶⁷ See Minnis 1988, 193.

A *canzone*, according to the true meaning of the word *cantio*, is an act of singing, in an active or passive sense, just as *lectio* means an act of reading, in an active [*actus*] or passive [*passio*] sense. But let me define more precisely what I have just said, according, that is, to whether this act of singing is active or passive. And on this point it must be taken into account that *cantio* has a double meaning: one usage refers to something created by an author, so that there is action—and this is the sense in which Virgil uses the word in the first book of the *Aeneid*, when he writes “*arma virumque cano*”; the other refers to the occasions on which this creation is performed, either by the author or by someone else, whoever it may be, with or without a musical accompaniment—and in this sense it is passive. For on such occasions the *canzone* itself acts upon someone or something, whereas in the former case it is acted upon; and so in one case it appears as an action carried out by someone, in the other as an action perceived by someone. And because it is acted upon before it acts in its turn, the argument seems plausible, indeed convincing, that it takes its name from the fact that it is acted upon, and is somebody’s action, rather than from the fact that it acts upon others. The proof of this is the fact that we never say “that’s Peter’s song” when referring to something Peter has performed, but only to something he has written.⁶⁸

Dante not only distinguishes between creation and performance, but also between the performance of a work by its author or by someone else (the same distinction often drawn between the Occitan terms *trobador* and *joglar*⁶⁹). In the case of Antigone’s song, its status as a spontaneous composition or as a rehearsed piece performed by Antigone (who may or may not be its author) is unclear.⁷⁰ As such, the lyric’s purpose in the context of the narrative is also ambiguous: have the events of the day inspired Antigone to compose a song for her

⁶⁸ Dante Alighieri 1996, 71.

⁶⁹ See Dronke 1996, 23-31.

⁷⁰ Although the narrative identifies it as a “Troian song,” Criseyde’s apparent unfamiliarity with it suggests that this is perhaps more of a stylistic label than an indication that the piece is a widely-known composition.

own enjoyment, or is Antigone reciting a lyric in order to provoke a reaction (or to produce a particular mood, to return to Hegel's terminology) in Criseyde, her audience? In other words, is the song acted upon by Antigone, or does it act upon someone else?

The question would seem to occur to Criseyde as well, who, immediately after hearing the song, demands that Antigone reveal the author's name:

And of hir song right with that word she stente,
And therwithal, "Now nece," quod Criseyde,
"Who made this song now with so good entente?"
Antygone answerde anoon and seyde,
"Madame, ywys, the goodlieste mayde
Of gret estat in al the town of Troye,
And let hire lif in moste honour and joye." (II.876-82)

If Criseyde has begun to relate herself to the ego of Antigone's lyric, it should not be surprising. The song is so universal in its claims, so free of particulars, that it could easily circulate outside of the context of Chaucer's narrative (or, within the poem's context, beyond the range of Criseyde's own personal experiences) and remain compelling and comprehensible: a subjective but generalized experience that any reader or listener might internalize and share. Judson Boyce Allen discusses the permeability of the lyric speaker's pronouns in his essay "Grammar, Poetic Form, and the Lyric Ego: a Medieval *a priori*":

lyric. . . in most cases utters the position of a definite but unspecified ego whose position the audience is invited to occupy. . . . That the pronoun signifies substance without quality both makes demands on reality, in involving substance, and invites qualification. That first and second person pronouns are demonstrative, that is, presume or guarantee presence, again makes demands upon reality—uttered in the lyric poem, they

exist as ideal or universal to each member of the audience's own particularity and invite him to perfect or universalize himself by occupying that language as his own. Acting in this way, the lyric does not communicate—the physical ego of the performer is not relevant but enacts itself only to invite plagiarization—rather, it is a definite and informing ego position within which any given human hearer is invited to become true.⁷¹

Antigone's *canso* is therefore not unlike numerous other medieval love lyrics that focus on the emotions of the amorous speaking subject while describing only those general details common to the most typified of romantic scenarios. J. A. Burrow also attests to the universal ego of the lyric:

Indeed, one might argue that the poet's own thoughts and sentiments found direct expression less often in lyrics than in other kinds of writing. . . . To say "I" in a poem of this kind is not, as in ordinary conversation, normally to refer to oneself. . . . In many medieval first-person poems, the "I" speaks not for an individual but for a type. The speaker is to be understood not as the poet himself, nor as any other individual speaker, but as a lover, a penitent sinner, or a devotee of the Virgin. Such lyrics offered themselves to be used by any amorous, or penitent, or devout reader for his own individual devotions, or confession, or wooing; and there is a good deal of evidence that they were indeed appropriated by individual readers in just this way.⁷²

In this sense, authorship for the lyric should be irrelevant: the lyric ego is merely the substantiation of a particular type, a collection of subjective experiences and utterances so typified as to be nearly universal.

But for Criseyde there seems to be some resistance to this universal identification with the lyric ego. She rejects Antigone's song

⁷¹ Allen 1984, 208.

⁷² Burrow 1982, 61.

as an anonymous experience (simultaneously isolating the song further from the narrative discourse) and asks the puzzling question “Who made this song now with so good entente?” The prepositional phrase *with so good entente* is slightly ambiguous in this sentence, as it could be either a complement of the noun *song* or of the verb *made*. Is Criseyde asking Antigone who made this good-intentioned song? Or is she perhaps demanding to know who made this song in this particular way: who, in other words, gave it its current form, made it the kind of well-intended song that it is? The curious adverb “now,” which could perhaps just be metrical filler, adds to this latter sense of Criseyde’s query: who recently has given this song, this old lyric paradigm, such a good intention? Finally, the prepositional phrase might be complementary of the verb: who made with such good intention this song?

In all of these possible readings, but most especially in the last, what Criseyde could potentially be after is the *intentio auctoris*, or the intention of the poem’s author: an idea that Chaucer often maps onto the Middle English word *entente*.⁷³ Alastair Minnis defines the *intentio* as the “didactic and edifying purpose of the author in producing the text in question. . . . The reader of a work should regard authorial intention as the kernel, claimed Dominicus Gundissalinus (writing shortly after 1150): whoever is ignorant of the *intentio*, as it were, leaves the kernel intact and eats the poor shell.”⁷⁴ Insofar as it is didactic, the *intentio* is a reinforcement of Dante’s statement that

⁷³ Minnis 1988, 191, and 1981, 375-6.

⁷⁴ Minnis 1988, 20.

literature is meant to *act upon* something, and Criseyde in this case would seem to be acknowledging that fact. Criseyde, after hearing the song, admits that the *intentio* is good or edifying.

But Criseyde's concerns would seem to lie more with the *auctor* herself rather than her *intentio*. Her curiosity about the author suggests Criseyde's resistance to her own identification with the lyric ego of the poetic discourse. Antigone's answer to her aunt's question is direct without being specific: "the goodlieste mayde / Of gret estat in al the town of Troye, / And let hire lif in moste honour and joye." Rather than identifying a particular person, Antigone provides a depiction of a generic type of woman that could easily describe either Antigone (therefore leaving the question of her own authorship open) or Criseyde, further abstracting the song as endemic to a generic mode of poetic discourse. But this woman, in addition to being a Trojan of great estate, also lived her life in honor and joy: a concept most appealing to Criseyde.

Antigone's vague but suggestive response would appear to be effective in provoking her aunt, for Criseyde immediately betrays signs of identification with the lyric:

"Forsothe, so it semeth by hire song,"
Quod tho Criseyde, and gan therwith to sike,
And seyde, "Lord, is ther swych blisse among
Thise loveres, as they konne faire endite?"
"Ye, wis," quod fresshe Antigone the white,
"For alle the folk that han or ben on lyve
Ne konne wel the blisse of love discryve." (II.883-89)

Criseyde immediately asks whether *all* lovers have such bliss, and in so doing she is already generalizing outwards, applying this particular

lyric ego not only to her potential situation, but to the universal situation of all lovers: a privileged group whose ranks she now has the opportunity to join—the authors of this particular type of poetic discourse. Here at last Criseyde places herself within the subject position of the lyric “I,” and the lyric, to recall Hegel, produces in her the very feelings that it describes, “those traits which re-echo and harmonize with [her] inner emotion and which, by expressing that emotion in the most living way, are best able to arouse in the listener the same feeling”.⁷⁵

But every word which that she of hire herde,
She gan to prenten in hire herte faste,
And ay gan love hire lasse for t'agaste
Than it dide erst, and synken in hire herte,
That she wex somewhat able to converte. (II.899-903)

It is only by experiencing the joys of love through Antigone's song and occupying the position of the lyric ego that Criseyde is at last convinced of the benefits of love. Whereas Troilus' song marked an unsuccessful attempt to enact a discourse and effect a change in his circumstances, Antigone's lyric acts upon Criseyde, and the power of poetry to make something happen is no longer in question.

Criseyde's identification with Antigone's song, her recognition of a personal expression that could potentially be (but is not currently) her own, points up an important difference between medieval and modern lyric. The modern, expressivist lyric, as Theodor Adorno argues in his lecture on the lyric and society, affords the particular with a general relevance:

⁷⁵ Hegel, 1116.

[the lyric's] generality is not a *volonté de tous*, not a generality which arises through an ability to communicate just those things which others are not able to express. Rather, the descent into individuality raises the lyric poem to the realm of the general by virtue of its bringing to light things undistorted, ungrasped, things not yet subsumed—and thus the poem anticipates, in an abstract way, a condition in which no mere generalities (i.e. extreme particularities) can bind and chain that which is human. From a condition of unrestrained individuation, the lyric work strives for, awaits the realm of the general.⁷⁶

It is not the capacity to communicate what others experience that renders the lyric accessible. The audience does not in it recognize itself or its abstract relationship with society. Rather, what is individual in the modern lyric remains irreducibly particular, even when the lyric wins a wide reception. It is that very particularity, that “expression of individual experiences and stirrings of emotion” yet unmediated by society that constitutes the lyric’s social content.⁷⁷ By converting personal feelings into the objective form of poetry, the poet allows those feelings to participate in generality, to enjoy a persisting reality in a poetic expression against which others can measure their own peculiar experiences.

Antigone’s song, however, does not function in precisely this way. Whereas the modern lyric for Adorno seeks to generalize particularity, medieval lyric particularizes generality. Antigone’s song does not communicate itself as the testament of any peculiar individual. Rather, the speaker in the poem identifies only with a recurring poetic type, namely that of the amorous subject who addresses a lover or

⁷⁶ Adorno 2000, 213.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 213.

Love himself, often in complaint but occasionally in gratitude. This commonplace is attested in numerous medieval vocative addresses, from the lyrics of the troubadours and *trouvères* and their English derivatives up through fourteenth-century French hybrid poems and *dits amoureux*. Thus the mid-twelfth century troubadour Giraut de Borneil interrogates Love: “Amors, / E sim clam de vos / Seraus honors? / – No, per ma fe, / Car nos cove, / Des qu’en vostra mantenenza / M’aviatz, / Qu’eram gecatz; / Ans pessatz / Com cellam vuella / Cui eu vuell” [And if I complain about you, Love, will it do you honor? – No, indeed, for it is not fitting that you should abandon me now, once you have had me in your keeping. You should think instead how to make the lady I desire desire me too].⁷⁸ The Harley Lyric “Blow, northerne wynd” contains a similar complaint, but in indirect discourse: “To Loue, þat leflich [*pleasant*] is in londe, / y tolde him, as ych vnderstonde, / hou þis hende [*fair one*] haþ hent [*taken*] in honde / on huerte þat myn wes. . .”⁷⁹ Rarely do such poems impart detail more specific than a skeletal scenario, such as a frustrating courtship or a consummated affair. The characters are always

⁷⁸ Both the Occitan and the English translation are from Giraut de Borneil 1989, 49-50.

⁷⁹ Brook 1948, 50. Wimsatt 1976, 288-93 identifies a number of potential sources and influences for Antigone’s song, including the following excerpt from one of Guillaume de Machaut’s lyrics:

Et pour ce sui pleine d’envoieure,
 Gaye de cuer et vif tres liement
 Et ren toudis à Amours la droiture
 Que je li doi; c’est amer loyaument
 En foy, de cuer et de fait.

[And therefore I am filled with delight, happy of heart and very joyfully alive, and I give always to Love the dues that I owe him: that is, to love loyally in [good] faith in heart and in deed]

abstracted types: the distant lover who refuses mercy, the supplicant who insists on his loyalty, the benevolent or silent empowered figure. Such lyric is generated not via a mimesis of the poet's personal life and experiences, but rather a conscious variation on established, literary commonplaces.

Criseyde's question is an attempt to assign this general song a peculiar identity. Despite its abstract and thoroughly conventional treatment of the subject of love and its rewards, the song carries for Criseyde the potential to embody an actual scenario, to be unmediated by the literary tradition and truly representative of individual experience. Criseyde, by seeking the name of the author, not only wishes to determine that author's *intentio*, but also to associate the described experiences with a unique individual, thereby assigning the lyric a sort of mimetic potential: the ability, in other words, to reflect ontological truth and not just literary custom. Criseyde wishes to affix to the song specific details, to withdraw it from the anonymous realm of a purely literary lyric and ground it in everyday experience. In a sense, what Criseyde seeks with her question is a method of demonstrating that the song can indeed have a generating impulse in a single individual. Once she discovers that the author's station is equivalent to her own, Criseyde immediately begins to apply the song to her own specific situation, to occupy fully the speaking position and to identify the generalized lyric song—devoid of specific details—as a description of her own private life.

Even Troilus' songs, born from his peculiar emotional struggles, lack the individual character of modern lyric. Although we might hear

in Troilus' passionate compositions the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," these songs nonetheless fall short of the Wordsworthian ideal in that their composition is not preceded by a period of contemplation. For Wordsworth, as we have already seen, emotion must be "recollected in tranquility" so as to "actually exist in the mind,"⁸⁰ but a process of intellection has rendered that recalled emotion less immediate than the original feeling; thus the emotion bears the traces of its own poetic re-making. Chaucer's narrative contextualizes Troilus' songs as impromptu and unmediated compositions marking the emotional apogees of his relationship with Criseyde. The result is a poetry that seems raw and subjective: an ideal generative kernel, perhaps, for a truly individual poetry.

But to characterize Troilus' songs in this way is to ignore their literary heritage. When Troilus first falls victim to love's snares, he does not voice his despair in his own words, but rather paraphrases Petrarch's sonnet 132, itself a poem modeled heavily on earlier examples of troubadourian lament. Troilus thus sings a conventional song that has passed through the mouths of countless men before him. There is nothing in the song that is his own, no mention of any particulars that ground the text in his own unique experience. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the song's relevance to Troilus' situation, nor can we deny the forcefulness with which he identifies with the lyric speaker. In re-performing the mediated convention, Troilus creates a kind of unmediated experience that seems peculiar to himself.

⁸⁰ Wordsworth 1974, 1:148.

And so we come full circle, and in the process expose a number of ways in which lyric can interact with the medieval long poem. The highly conventional, nearly universalized content of the medieval lyric, so far removed from its modern expressivist descendants, can in fact become personalized via a process of re-performance. By re-inhabiting established conventions, those conventions become experiential. Both the medieval and modern lyric thus contain a kernel of individual expression, although the means by which this is achieved and revealed are indicative of the fundamental differences between the two forms. In the following chapters, we shall continue to investigate the balance between experience and convention in the medieval lyric and examine the relevance of this binary to *Piers Plowman*, where it is of great importance to the poem's lyricism.

Chapter Two

Medieval Genre Theory and Lyric Hermeneutics

It may be objected that the previous chapter's broad outline of lyric poetry employed the terms "genre" and "subgenre" without addressing whether genre is a clear or stable category in medieval literature, whose historical readers produced few taxonomies of literary forms that we would today consider to be generic. As scholars have noted before, one reason why a historical systematics of medieval genres cannot be produced is simply because most medieval poetic theory is largely uninterested in isolating generic categories. When such divisions are made in medieval commentaries, they are usually inconsistent with each other, and what common terminology they share often varies in significance. But we by no means should infer that the lack of enduring and consistent generic categories in discussions of literature and poetics by medieval authors indicates that they lacked an understanding of poetic kinds and registers, and indeed exploring these can help us rethink the limits of our own post-medieval taxonomies of genre.

This chapter will investigate what medieval notions of genre and literary tradition are available to us, and it will ultimately consider what a better understanding of medieval literary kinds can divulge in terms of the significance and function of *Piers Plowman*'s mix of poetic registers. I do not intend to suggest that Langland was familiar with any of the specific commentaries mentioned here, nor that he was acquainted with Occitan poetry where some important developments

appear that I discuss below, though there are a number of historical connections between the songs of the troubadours and Middle English lyric. Rather, my claim is chiefly conceptual and not historical, or historical in a broad way that establishes a horizon of conceptual possibilities and resources. My purpose is to explore the range of structural and thematic congruities between works that medieval authors and commentators were often keenly aware of, and which especially enabled them to combine discrete poetic forms in sophisticated ways as does the hybrid text *Piers Plowman*.

There are a number of likely places to look for a medieval generic system, but the fullest—and thus the place to start—is the robust tradition of Latin grammatical treatises, or *artes grammaticae*, which developed from the writings of late Roman authorities. After exploring those, we can turn to other possibilities, especially in the vernacular traditions of medieval culture. *Grammatica*, like *rhetorica* and *dialectica*, comprised one of the three subjects of the *trivium*, or arts of discourse, and was traditionally divided into two distinct disciplines: *scientia interpretandi*, or the reading and interpretation of texts, and *ratio recte scribendi et loquendi*, or the rules for proper speech and composition according to established practice.⁸¹ Towards the latter half of the twelfth century, a number of developments, including the translation into Latin of a small corpus of Aristotle’s works, stimulated new interests in the areas of “speculative” grammar, or the theoretical investigation of how language creates meaning, and what James Murphy has called “preceptive” grammar, which provides guidelines

⁸¹ Irvine and Thompson 2005, 15ff.

for writing correctly in particular literary modes.⁸² Preceptive grammars commonly cover one of three separate spheres of writing: *ars prosaica* or *ars dictandi*, poetry and prose that do not subscribe to any particular metrical rule; *ars metrica*, or metrical composition according to feet and scansion; and *ars rithmica*, which John of Garland defines as *consonancia dictionum in fine similium, sub certo numero sine metricis pedibus ordinate* (“harmony of words with similar endings, ordered by a certain number [of syllables] but not metrical feet”). *Artes rithmicæ* include such things as hymns and liturgical sequences.⁸³

The development of specialized preceptive grammatical arts from the later twelfth century onwards signals a discontinuity in the grammatical tradition and its origins in ancient theory. Before the mid-twelfth century, the tradition had been largely descriptive in nature, its constituent texts concerned almost exclusively with the enumeration of syntactical rules, various rhetorical *figurae*, and the eight parts of speech.⁸⁴ On these topics, Priscian, Donatus, and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (referred to as the “Second Rhetoric” in the Middle Ages) provided the bulk of the material and consequently were favorite sources for medieval encyclopedists such as Isidore of Seville and Rabanus Maurus.

This longstanding grammatical tradition, however, had little to contribute towards a comprehensive ordering of literary kinds,

⁸² Murphy 1974, chapt. 4. See especially 140ff.

⁸³ John of Garland 1974, 160. On the tripartite division of *grammatica* see Murphy 1961, 197 and 1974, 157ff.

⁸⁴ Murphy 1974, 139-40.

delimiting no definitive systematics of genre. Nevertheless, located throughout the set of grammatical commentaries from the classical period through the later Middle Ages were a small number of recurring schemata that divided works of literature according to a variety of criteria. Although these schemata fail to approach a complete generic system by modern standards, they do elucidate the ways in which medieval authors ordered their own works. A closer look at these schemes will allow us to delimit the typological systems at work in medieval literature.⁸⁵

One such classificatory system that informed medieval notions of literary kinds was Plato and Aristotle's tripartite division of poetry according to the three possible forms of delivery, or agents of mimesis (i.e., speaking in one's own voice, as in lyric; through the voices of others, as in drama; or in a mixed mode, as in epic). This formulation resurfaces in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (VIII.vii), where he illustrates the division with various works from Vergil's canon:

Apud poetas autem tres characteres esse dicendi: unum, in quo tantum poeta loquitur, ut est in libris Vergilii Georgicorum; alium dramaticum, in quo nusquam poeta loquitur, ut est in comoediis et tragoediis; tertium mixtum, ut est in Aeneide. Nam poeta illic et introductae personae loquuntur.⁸⁶

[Also in poetry there are three styles of speaking: the first, in which only the poet speaks, as is the case in the book of Vergil's *Georgics*; the other drama, in which the poet does not speak at all, as is the case in comedies and tragedies; and the third mixed, as is the case in the *Aeneid*. For there the poet and the introduced characters speak.]

⁸⁵ Cf. Jauss 1982, 95.

⁸⁶ Isidore of Seville 1911.

Bede includes this system in *De schematibus et tropis*, but substitutes biblical texts for Vergil's works in an attempt to appropriate classical grammatical principles in the realm of Christian exegesis.⁸⁷

Vergil's works provided another taxonomical scheme for medieval commentators, who used the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid* to illustrate the three *genera dicendi* or levels of material style: *humile*, *medium*, and *sublime*.⁸⁸ According to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, each style corresponds to progressively more elevated language and ornate syntactic arrangement:

Gravis est quae constat ex verborum gravium levi et ornata constructione. Mediocris est quae constat ex humiliore neque tamen ex infima et pervulgatissima verborum dignitate. Adtenuata est quae demissa est usque ad usitatissimam puri consuetudinem sermonis. (IV.viii)⁸⁹

[The Grand type consists of a smooth and ornate arrangement of impressive words. The Middle type consists of words of a lower, yet not of the lowest and most colloquial, class of words. The Simple type is brought down even to the most current idiom of standard speech.]

Later prescriptive grammarians expanded upon this tripartite division to include not only stylistic and linguistic features of the poetry but the social class of the characters depicted therein as well, as John of Garland demonstrates in the fifth chapter of the *Parisiana Poetria*:

Item sunt tres stili secundum tres status hominum. Pastoralis conuenit stilus humilis, agricolis mediocris, grauis grauibus

⁸⁷ See, for instance, the selections translated by Gussie Hecht Tannenhaus in Miller et al. 1973, 96-122.

⁸⁸ Cf. Kelly 1991, 71-8.

⁸⁹ Although the three styles are referred to as *adtenuata*, *mediocris*, and *gravis* in the *ad Herennium*, the concept is the same. Translation and text from [Cicero] 1989, 268-9.

personis, que persunt pastoribus et agricolis. Pastores diuicias inueniunt in animalibus, agricolae illas adaugent terram excolendo, principes uero possident eas inferioribus donando. Secundum has tres personas Virgilius tria composuit opera: Bucolica, Georgica, Eneyda.⁹⁰

[Again there are three styles according to the three estates of men. The low style is appropriate to the pastoral life, the middle to farmers, and the high [literally “serious”] to important people who are above shepherds and farmers. Shepherds find riches in animals, farmers augment theirs by cultivating the earth, yet princes possess them by giving them to inferiors. According to these three estates Vergil composed three works: the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid*.]

The union of the three *genera dicendi* with the subject matter of Vergil’s poetry found visual representation in the figure of the *rota Virgilio*, or Vergil’s Wheel, which was commonly depicted in manuscripts as a circle divided into three sections. Listed within each of the three sections are nouns corresponding to one of the levels of style embodied by Vergil’s works. For instance, the section of the wheel representing the *grauis stilus* (exemplified by the *Aeneid*) identifies soldier (*miles*) and governor (*dominans*) as appropriate objects, while the *mediocris stilus* section lists farmer (*agricola*), and the *humilis* the leisurely shepherd (*pastor ociosus*). This tripartite scheme also incorporates hierarchies of animals (horse, cow, sheep); implements (sword, plow, crook); locations (city, camp; field; pasture); and trees (laurel, cedar; apple- and pear-trees; beech).

⁹⁰ John of Garland 1974, 86. See also the section *Tria Genera Personarum et Tria Genera Hominum* in the first chapter (p. 10), which lists examples of the different types of men to be found in each estate. John of Garland closes by commenting, once more, that Vergil created his three works according to these three types of men: *Secundum ista tria genera hominum inuenit Virgilius stilum triplicem de quo postea docebitur.*

The three styles famously resurface in the second book of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, but these Dante grafts onto another classical generic scheme, namely that of the three types of poetry: tragedy, elegy, and comedy.⁹¹ According to Dante, each of the three poetic kinds requires a different level of discourse appropriate to its subject matter, with tragedy demanding the most superior language in the form of what he calls the *illustre vulgare*, or illustrious vernacular. Such notions of tragedy and comedy had been at the disposal of grammarians since the time of Donatus, who distinguished the two modes according to the differing nature of the plays by Terence and Euripides: "Eunuchus comoedia, Orestes tragoedia."⁹² In medieval grammatical treatises, the two categories were sometimes expanded to include other genres such as lyric and elegy, although the formulation was rarely consistent. For example, in his *Etymologiae* (VIII.vii), Isidore recognizes lyric and theological poetry in addition to tragedy and comedy as discrete literary categories. Tragedy, he insists, tells of *res publicas et regum historias*, or public affairs and histories of kings, while comedy *privatorum hominum praedicant acta*, or relates the deeds of ordinary men. What is more, tragedy's subject matter must be drawn from mournful material (*ex rebus luctuosis*) while comedy should depict cheerful events (*rebus laetis*). As for lyric, Isidore states only that the category encompasses a variety of poems (or, literally, songs: *a varietate carminum*) while theological poetry consists of songs about God. John of Garland further specifies that comedy should

⁹¹ The union between the *genera dicendi* and the triad of tragedy, elegy, and comedy was not uncommon. See Kelly 1991, 75.

⁹² Kelly 1966, 264 n. 13.

include a cast of five characters, specifically a husband and his wife (*maritus et eius uxor*), an adulterer and his accomplice or critic (*adulter et minister adulteri vel eius castigator*), and finally the adulteress's nurse or husband's servant (*nutrix adultere vel seruus mariti*). But failing these five characters and the subject of adultery, Garland claims that a work is still comic so long as it is humorous and treats of low or base material (*quia quandoque materia iocose recitata comedia nuncupatur*). Tragedy, on the other hand, which is composed in a high style, must start in joy but end in grief (*incipiens a gaudio et terminans in luctum*).⁹³

All of these various schemata suggest that, for medieval authors and commentators, a work's subject matter and purpose were equally as important as its means of representation in determining its classification. Yet as the basis for a historically-defined system of genres, the potential of this system of poetics is undermined by its inconsistent application throughout the commentary tradition. By far the most immutable and enduring distinction is the divide between tragedy and comedy, but this binary system fails to account for the rich variety of writing modes apparent in any synchronic sampling of texts from the medieval period, as attested by the addition in grammatical treatises of supplementary modes such as elegy or lyric.

In response to this uneven treatment of genre in the *artes grammaticae*, James Murphy has argued that medieval poetics altogether lacks a sense of genre and is instead informed by a

⁹³ John of Garland 1974, 80-82. For a more in-depth study of the representation of comedy and tragedy in the Middle Ages, see H. Ansgar Kelly 1993.

“metapoetic principle” defined by the grammatical treatises used to instruct young students. These school arts (which included many of the texts mentioned above) instilled in every author a “rhetoric of discovery, shaping, and phrasing” that was prior to the act of Latin composition and independent of any notion of genre; as a result, a genre, to the extent that it can be historically defined, serves merely as one out of several molds to be filled according to the techniques taught by the *artes*: “a mere *topos* or *locus*, important only as a channel for the creative outpouring of discovered—shaped—phrased materials.”⁹⁴ Because this grammatical infrastructure underlay all literary creation for authors with Latin training, it informed vernacular composition as well.⁹⁵ Thus Dante applies the familiar tripartite division of tragedy, comedy, and elegy of the Latin grammars to his discussion of vernacular poetics in *De vulgari eloquentia*.

Although the greater part of extant medieval literature from Western Europe was indeed composed by those with some degree of clerical training, Murphy’s theory of metapoetics cannot account for those works with authors largely ignorant of Latin rhetorical conventions, including perhaps some popular ballad and sung forms, many of which doubtless failed to survive into the modern period. In addition, a number of authors of grammatical treatises were not as unconcerned with generic taxonomies as were those responsible for the Latin arts of poetry; nor were they all directed at young students. The vernacular commentary tradition that flourished in southern

⁹⁴ Murphy 1979, 1, 3.

⁹⁵ Murphy 2005, 66-7.

France after the thirteenth century was, in fact, quite invested in the systematic classification of poetic forms according to both formal and thematic properties. These Occitan treatises concerned themselves solely with the vernacular poetic forms perfected by the troubadours in preceding centuries and therefore did not encourage departures from established models. Because the apogee of troubadour activity had passed decades before the composition of even the earliest Occitan poetic tracts, these works were attempts not to stimulate new poetic innovations but rather to preserve and categorize the aging corpus of extant troubadour poetry and to instruct practicing poets to compose in imitation of the masters.

Since the Occitan treatises comprise one of the most robust commentary traditions developed in medieval European literature, they are well worth lingering over. We shall see that, although these commentaries are too late in time to reflect accurately any conceptions of genre that the original troubadour poets might have had while writing their poems, they are nevertheless illustrative of a genuine medieval typology: a way of articulating textual relationships that will be of some service in our present endeavor to identify the generic boundaries within a hybrid text such as *Piers Plowman*. Moreover, they illustrate the range of distinctively vernacular forms of literary “theory” of genre in medieval culture, and suggest the resources for other expansions in vernacular poetry itself.

The earliest of the extant Occitan arts was composed by the Catalan Raimon Vidal between 1190 and 1213 at the very end of the classical period of troubadour poetic production. Vidal, likely writing

for aspiring poets from areas other than southern France, composed the *Razos de trobar* as a guide to the Occitan language, which he synecdochically refers to by the region name *Lemosin*. As a result of his focus on Occitan syntax and morphology, his work is far less concerned with generic taxonomies than are those of his successors. Roughly two-thirds of the *Razos* cover morphological forms, and Vidal's comments on grammar are inclined more towards preventing common errors than providing guidelines for composition. Nevertheless, he does draw one notable distinction between generic types: "La parladura francesa val mais et [es] plus avinenz a far romanz et pasturellas, mas cella de Lemosin val mais per far vers et cansons et serventes" ("The French language is best and more attractive for the composition of romance and *pastorelas*, but that of *Lemosin* is best for *cansos*, *serventes*, and *vers*").⁹⁶ In her notes to the translated text of the *Razos*, Marianne Shapiro suggests that "this grouping separates essentially lyric from essentially narrative genres";⁹⁷ however, it is not clear that Vidal's comments are intended to establish any generic relationships among the two groups of works listed. Although the term *romanz* suggests the longer poetic narratives popular in northern France, the word *pasturella* could just as easily refer to a shorter lyric form, such as some of the poems of Marcabru (although Vidal's insistence that the best *pasturellas* are French and not Occitan suggests that he did not have Marcabru's poetry in

⁹⁶ Marshall 1972, 6.

⁹⁷ Shapiro 1990, 236 n. 7. Shapiro provides the translation of the *Razos* in her Appendix to Dante's text.

mind).⁹⁸ The difference between *vers* and *canso* is a matter of some debate among modern scholars: though the terms do not seem to have been used concurrently by troubadours, they both usually refer to short poems set to music, especially in the later commentary tradition.⁹⁹

Vidal's use of these specific classifications implies the existence of an established taxonomic system of literary forms familiar enough to be accessible and unambiguous for his readers. Later grammatical treatises in Occitan refer to these discrete poetic forms as *dictatz*, a technical word meaning "poems" whose use in these treatises often approaches the modern concept of a genre or literary kind. For instance, in 1340, nearly two centuries after troubadour poetic production had reached its apogee, Guilhem Molinier, author of the *Leys d'amors* ("Laws of Love"), a comprehensive guide to poetic composition drafted for Toulouse's Floral Games, proposed the following guidelines for creating new categories of poetry:

Autres dictatz pot hom far et ad aquels nom enpauzar segon la voluntat de cel que dicta, e segon que requier le dictatz. . . . Et en aytals dictatz no trobam cert nombre de coblas, per que en aytals dictatz pot hom far aytantas coblas quos vol. . . . Hom fa lo dictat de bal, tractan d'amors o de lauzors or d'austra materia honesta, segon la voluntat del dictayre. . . . Aytals dictatz no-principals pot haver tornada o no; e pot hom en loc de tornada repetir la una cobla del comensamen o de la fi.

⁹⁸ The *Doctrina de compoundre dictats*, for instance, specifies that the *pastora* must have six to eight stanzas: "E potz li fer vi o viij cobles, e so novell o so estrayn ia passat" (Marshall 1972, 96). Sandison 1913, 15-24 remains one of the more comprehensive introductions to the formal features of the *pastourelle*.

⁹⁹ After the middle of the thirteenth century the word *vers* came to signify a didactic poem (see the quoted passage below from the *Doctrina de compoundre dictats*). For more information on the *vers* / *canso* dichotomy, see Bec 1982, 31-47; more recent appraisals are located in Paden 2000 and Pickens 2000.

[One may compose other *dictatz* and give them names according to the will of the one who writes, and according to what the *dictatz* requires. . . . And in such *dictatz* we do not find a set number of stanzas, because in such *dictatz* one may compose as many stanzas as one chooses. . . . One composes the *dictat* of the *bal*, dealing with love or praise of another decorous subject, according to the will of the poet. . . . Such a nonprincipal *dictatz* can have a *tornada* or not; and one may, instead of a *tornada*, repeat a stanza from the beginning or the end.]¹⁰⁰

The word “dictatz” in this passage and throughout Molinier’s larger work designates discrete categories of poetry, the member texts of which share certain formal and thematic characteristics in common. Molinier’s emphasis on stanzaic structure and subject matter as definitive of poetic kinds is typical of the Occitan commentary tradition and reappears in the brief *De doctrina de compondre dictats* (“On the art of composing *dictatz*”). The *Doctrina* enumerates the contentual, structural, and musical properties of seventeen different categories of troubadour poetry in order to instruct those who aspire to become poets themselves: “per les rahons desus dites quez eu t’ay mostrades, poras venir a perfeccio de fer aquestes sens errada, ses reprendimen, com fer ne volrras”¹⁰¹ (“By means of the teachings listed below that I have shown you, you can arrive at perfection at making these [poems] without error or blame, just as you wish to do”). The importance of content to a poem’s classification is especially apparent in the *Doctrina*’s comparison of *canso* and *vers*, which I will reproduce here at length:

¹⁰⁰ Text and translation (with my modifications) from Paden 2000, 31-2.

¹⁰¹ Marshall 1972, 95.

E primerament deus saber que canço deu parlar d'amor plazenment, e potz metre en ton parlar eximpli d'altra rayso, e ses mal dir e ses lauzor de re sino d'amor. Encara mes, deus saber que canço ha obs e deu haver cinch cobles; eyxamen n'i potz far, per abeylimen e per complimen de raho, 'vj' o 'vij' o 'viij' o 'ix', d'aquell compte que mes te placia. E potz hi far una tornada o dues, qual te vulles. E garda be que, en axi com començaras la raho en amor, que en aquella manera matexa la fins be e la seguesques. E dona li so noveyl co pus bell poras.

Si vols far vers, deus parlar de veritatz, de exemples e de proverbis o de lauzor, no pas en semblant d'amor; e que en axi com començaras, ho prosseguesques e'u fins, ab so novell tota vegada. E aquesta es la diferencia que es entre canço e vers, que la una rayso no es semblant de l'altra. E cert aytantes cobles se cove de far al vers com a la canço, e aytantes tornades.

[First of all you should know that a *canso* must speak pleasingly of love; and you may put into your speech samples of other subject matter, but without speaking ill of or praising anything but love. Furthermore, you should know that it is necessary that a *canso* needs to have and should have five stanzas; nevertheless, whether for pleasingness or for the completion of the argument, you may make six or seven or eight or nine or whatever number pleases you the most. You can make there one or two *tornadas*, as you like. And be careful that, in whatever way you begin your argument about love, you finish it in the same way. And give it a new melody as beautifully as you can.

If you wish to make a *vers*, you must speak of truth, of examples and of proverbs or praise that do not resemble love. And, in whatever way you begin [it], you should bring it to completion, with new music every time. And this is the difference between a *canso* and a *vers*, that the argument of one does not resemble that of the other. And certainly it is fitting to make the same [number of] stanzas for the *vers* as for the *canso*, and the same [number of] *tornadas*.]

Although the *canso* should have five *coblas*, or stanzas, the structure is mutable and can be expanded should the argument (*raho*) require the extra space. And it is the argument (*rayso*) again that

distinguishes the *canso* from the *vers*, which otherwise is identical to the *canso* in form. The sparse treatment of music in the *Doctrina* only emphasizes the importance of textual content to its generic system, for the author rarely specifies more than that the melody for a particular type of poetry should be new or borrowed.

This belated generic division of troubadour poetry has posed no small amount of difficulty for modern scholars, who have debated the validity of mapping this system, established *post factum*, onto the diachronic development of troubadour poetry before the thirteenth century. Pierre Bec, in addressing this disjunction between the categories inherent to a poetic system in the process of being formed (*une poétique à son essor*) and a historical taxonomy produced after the original tradition has ossified, insists that the difficulty with identifying a reasonable and accurate generic system stems from the fact that poets in late medieval Western Europe

ne paraissent pas avoir eu l'idée que les textes poétiques pouvaient être rangés en ensembles génériques; leur réflexion sur la poésie est d'abord tardive (XIIIe-XIVe s.), coïncidant souvent avec une période de décadence, et destinée surtout à d'éventuels créateurs qui ne sont pas d'entrée de jeu *dans* le code puisqu'ils sont étrangers (Catalans, Italiens). Cette réflexion est donc toujours assez fluctuante et les désignations mêmes des genres poétiques doivent être maniées avec prudence. Une typologie raisonnée n'est donc possible que *post rem*, en procédant à une redistribution plus pertinente des marques spécifiques relevées, et en tenant compte, sinon de genres définis d'emblée comme tels, mais de certaines traditions d'écriture qui finissent par isoler, dans la masse textuelle, un certain nombre d'ensembles structurés; en tenant compte aussi, dans toute la mesure du possible, de la terminologie héritée et des indices qu'elle implique, mais en l'épurant au maximum

dans le sens d'une identification relativement sans failles de chaque type textuel particulier.¹⁰²

[do not appear to have had the idea that poetic texts could be arranged in generic groupings; their reflection on poetry is, to begin with, belated (13th – 14th centuries), often contemporary with a period of decadence, and destined above all for eventual creators who are not from the outset *within* the code because they are foreigners (Catalans, Italians). This reflection is therefore always somewhat fluctuating and even the designations of poetic genres must be handled with care. A reasoned typology is only possible after the fact by conducting a more relevant redistribution of the specific marks identified and by taking into account not the genres defined as such from the start, but rather certain traditions of writing which eventually isolate, within the body of texts, a certain number of structured groupings; by taking into account also, as far as possible, the inherited terminology and the signs that it implies, while refining it to the utmost in the sense of a relatively flawless identification of each particular textual type.]

What Bec proposes is to abandon as itself indicative of generic distinctions the pursuit of the medieval nominalist typology, constituted by the technical terms with which the troubadours classify their poems, and establish instead a definitional taxonomy based upon unifying structural and thematic elements identifiable within the extant textual record. The nominalist system of technical designations such as *vers*, *canso*, and *sirventes* adopted by troubadours and further developed in Occitan grammatical treatises might be of some use in this undertaking as indicators of the variety of characteristics or “marks” recognized by medieval readers as pertinent to structured textual groupings, but should not themselves be adopted wholesale as representative of an intact generic system, as the rules were intended not as reasonable taxonomies of the diachronic development of

¹⁰² Bec 1982, 31.

troubadour poetic kinds, but rather as prescriptive guidelines for composing according to a reconstructed idiom. Bec's suggestion that the categorical system present in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century commentaries should inform only generally the guidelines which modern critics establish for their own divisions of medieval poetry, which benefit from a broad view of the literature's entire diachronic development, is typical of many modern theories of medieval genre.

Yet despite Bec's claim that people in the Middle Ages lacked a developed and enduring generic system, he does not question their ability to recognize the connections between related texts, whether consciously or unconsciously. A poetic genre, which he defines as "un ensemble cohérent de marques typologiques concernant soit le contenu, soit la forme, soit la juxtaposition des deux" ("a coherent grouping of typological marks based either on content, form, or the juxtaposition of both"), must be recognizable by its contemporary or subsequent readership as a collective entity on account of certain shared formal and contentual unities (and here he reveals his indebtedness to the two major taxonomical criteria employed by such grammars as *De doctrina de compondre dictats*). The medieval author is presumably aware of the *ensemble* of texts in which his own work participates, and the very properties that allow the author to recognize this relationship between text and genre are also available to the public and eventual rubricists of the text, who can accordingly make informed generic classifications of their own. Genre, therefore, is

un ensemble reconnu déjà comme tel à l'époque de sa production (ou à l'époque directement postérieure), à la fois par le poète (dans l'acte même de sa création) et par le public (au niveau de la réception du texte et de ses critères de valorisation); reconnu aussi tant par le créateur que par son public, grâce à une désignation «technique» appropriée qui le définisse et l'informe; reconnu enfin comme tel par les éventuelles rubriques des mss et plus tard, même si cette consécration est devenue parfois un lit de Procruste, dans les traités de poétologie.¹⁰³

[a grouping already recognized as such during the period of its production (or during the period directly following), at one and the same time by the poet (in the very act of its creation) and by the public (at the level of textual reception and of the criteria for valorization); recognized also as much by the creator as by his public, thanks to an appropriate “technical” designation that defines and informs it; recognized finally as such by the eventual rubrics of the manuscripts and afterwards, even though this consecration has perhaps become a Procrustean bed, in poetic treatises.]

Thus although medieval poetic treatises rarely present these classes of literature as formalized genres, “technical” medieval designations such as *vers*, *lai*, or *chanson de geste* nevertheless suggest the existence of such categories. In the previous chapter, we witnessed a similar classification system at work in *Troilus and Criseyde*’s lyric interludes, which the manuscripts’ glossators later identified as *cantica* inserted within the poem’s larger narrative structure.

Bec’s discussion of genre provides us with an alternate route for charting textual interactions in a literary culture that lacks explicit, native generic classifications (as is the case with the latter half of fourteenth-century England). As we have seen, various systems of poetic kinds existed in medieval Western Europe, and although some

¹⁰³ Ibid., 32.

of these systems, such as the Occitan grammars, are confined to particular regions or centuries, it would be a mistake to overlook their potential mobility. Chaucer, for instance, imported a number of French and Italian poetic forms and meters into English poetry, including the rhyme royal stanza used in the *Troilus*, which likely originates in the early fourteenth-century French ballade.¹⁰⁴

In the case of *Piers Plowman*, however, more pressing than the identification of such structural echoes (which would be largely obscured by *Piers Plowman*'s alliterative line) is the isolation of Bec's *marques spécifiques*, or specific marks that recall *certaines traditions d'écriture* via parallels that are more than merely metrical. While manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* do not, like those of the *Troilus*, contain glosses that identify such discrete poetic discourses at work within the larger narrative, there is no question that *Piers Plowman* discursively engages with the broader literary milieu of late medieval England and France. Though *Piers Plowman*'s poetic gestures are not always clearly signaled, they are not unidentifiable

A significant portion of modern Langland scholarship has been devoted to such source study, isolating origins and analogues for the poem's many quotations or comparing its content to that of similar literary kinds, such as sermons or satire. The question at the heart of these intertextual inquiries also motivates the present study: how does *Piers Plowman* offer itself as a poem to be read? For a text so concerned with the moral efficacy of literary production, such a question can only be answered by first addressing how Langland's

¹⁰⁴ See Wimsatt 1991, 143ff.

poem participates within the traditions established by anterior and contemporary literary productions. What marks embedded within the text provide, via implicit comparisons with other *traditions d'écriture*, what Anne Middleton has referred to as *Piers Plowman's* "instructions for use"?¹⁰⁵ How does the poem signal the native generic categories and conventions it adopts?

What follows is one attempt at delimiting not only an awareness within *Piers Plowman* of lyric traditions, but also a lyric methodology of reading: a lyric hermeneutics that informs the poem's greater structure.

In the first passus of *Piers Plowman's* A-text, Holy Church instructs the dreamer, Will, to "preche" her teachings "in þin harpe," should others request it of him while gathered at a meal (A.I.137-8). These lines, present only in the A-text, depict Will himself as a kind of minstrel or public performer, albeit one whose *materia* (i.e. that love is the "plante of pes") is more morally instructive than the songs of the "Iaperis and Iogelours and Iangleris of gestes" famously condemned by Dame Study. Holy Church's exhortation to Will to preach publicly in fact anticipates the quasi-clerical class of minstrel that Dame Study later advocates, comprised of those who have Holy Writ ever in their mouths and can tell of Tobit and the Twelve Apostles (10.31-33).¹⁰⁶

Such is the standard reading of this line in the current state of *Piers Plowman* studies. And while these conclusions are reasonable, what I would like to suggest here is that Holy Church's injunction to "harp"

¹⁰⁵ Middleton 1982a, 112.

¹⁰⁶ For more discussion on this topic, see Chapter Three of this study.

constitutes more than a mere passing reference to the larger distinction drawn throughout *Piers Plowman* between legitimate and illegitimate minstrelsy. The harp itself, a symbol that appears several times throughout the poem in relation to minstrelsy or poetic “makynge,” is the key to untangling the significance of Holy Church’s command: one that ultimately bears upon how we are to read the poem and interpret its frequent and somewhat disruptive lyric intervals.

Let us begin by considering several of the harp’s symbolic functions in late medieval literary and preaching traditions, starting first with metaphors for reading. In his discussion of the threefold understanding of Scripture in the *Didascalicon*, Hugh of St. Victor proposes the harp as a model for interpreting sacred text:

Unde modo mirabili omnis diuina scriptura ita per Dei sapientiam conuenientur suis partibus aptata est atque disposita, ut quidquid in ea continetur aut uice chordarum spiritualis intelligentie suauitatem personet, aut per historie seriem et littere soliditatem mysteriorum dicta sparsim posita continens, et quasi in unum connectens, ad modum ligni concaui super extensas chordas simul copulet, earum que sonum recipiens in se, dulciorem auribus referat, quem non solum chorda edidit, sed et lignum modulo corporis sui formauit. (V.2)¹⁰⁷

[Thus is it that, in a wonderful manner, all of sacred scripture is so suitably adjusted and arranged in all parts through the Wisdom of God that whatever is contained in it either resounds with the sweetness of spiritual understanding in the manner of strings; or, containing utterances of mysteries set here and there in the course of a historical narrative or in the substance of a literal context, and, as it were, connecting these up into one object, it binds them together all at once as the wood does which curves under the taut strings; and, receiving their sound into

¹⁰⁷ Hugh of St. Victor 1939.

itself, it reflects it more sweetly to our ears—a sound which the string alone has not yielded, but which the wood too has formed by the shape of its body.]]¹⁰⁸

The allegory of reading that Hugh here presents derives from the standard medieval exegetical model, in which all aspects of the text are to be understood under one comprehensive context and any subgenres mined, despite their literal and structural differences, for the same consistent truths that inform the entire work. All of these variously signifying passages can only be properly comprehended when framed by the biblical text in its entirety, much as the wood that surrounds and secures the harp strings allows them to sound in harmony.

Saint Bonaventure describes Scripture in very similar terms in his *Collationes in Hexaemeron*:

Similiter in sacra scriptura primo studere oportet in eius littera et textu et sicut in cithara quaelibet chorda ad consonantiam est necessaria ita tota scriptura est quaedam cithara ideo oportet totum textum sacrae scripturae habere in promptu alioquin nunquam erit scripturae promptus expositor. (Visio III Collatio VII)¹⁰⁹

[Similarly, in sacred scripture one should first study its literal words and text, and, just as in the harp a certain string is necessary for harmony, so all scripture is a certain harp, such that it is necessary to have the entire text of sacred scripture at the ready, for otherwise the expositor of scripture will never be fluent/responsive.]

Both Hugh's and Bonaventure's comparisons of biblical passages to individual strings sounding in harmony might have their source in

¹⁰⁸ Both Latin and English (with my minor modifications) from Hugh of St. Victor 1961, 121.

¹⁰⁹ Bonaventure 1934, 215.

Origen's Greek commentary on the Gospel of Mathew. The exposition of Matthew 5:9 in Book II reads as follows:

For as the different chords of the psalter or the lyre, each of which gives forth a certain sound of its own which seems unlike the sound of another chord, are thought by a man who is not musical and ignorant of the principle of musical harmony, to be inharmonious, because of the dissimilarity of the sounds, so those who are not skilled in hearing the harmony of God in the sacred scriptures think that the Old is not in harmony with the New, or the Prophets with the Law, or the Gospels with one another, or the Apostle with the Gospel, or with himself, or with the other Apostles. But he who comes instructed in the music of God, being a man wise in word and deed, and, on this account, like another David—which is, by interpretation, skilful with the hand—will bring out the sound of the music of God, having learned from this at the right time to strike the chords, now the chords of the Law, now the Gospel chords in harmony with them, and again the Prophetic chords, and, when reason demands it, the Apostolic chords which are in harmony with the Prophetic, and likewise the Apostolic with those of the Gospels. For he knows that all the [s]cripture is the one perfect and harmonized instrument of God, which from different sounds gives forth one saving voice to those willing to learn, which stops and restrains every working of an evil spirit, just as the music of David laid to rest the evil spirit in Saul, which also was choking him.¹¹⁰

Both Bonaventure and Origen speak of the knowledge requisite to the understanding of scriptural harmony, for one must first know the strings to strike the chord. When properly joined in this manner, the various books of the scriptures produce a salvific sound, despite any apparent incongruities in their content.

Robert Mannyng attributes a different significance to the harp in *Handlyng Synne*, his early fourteenth-century translation of the Anglo-Norman *Manuel des pechiez*. Following a brief passage condemning

¹¹⁰ Menzies 1995, 413.

worldly minstrels, Mannyng describes how Bishop Robert Grosseteste used to maintain a harper's chamber adjacent to his study. When asked why he took such delight in minstrelsy, Grosseteste allegedly mustered the following defense:

Pe vertu of þe harpe þurgh skyle & ryght
Wyll destruye þe fendys myght,
And to þe cros by gode skeyl, [*reason*]
Ys þe harpe lykned weyl.
A nouþer poynt cumforteþ me,
Þat god haþ sent vnto a tre
So moche ioie to here wyþ eere.
Mocher than more ioie ys þere
Wyþ god hymself þer he wones. [*where he dwells*]
Pe harpe þer of me ofte mones
Of þe ioie and of þe blys,
Where god hym self woneþ and ys. (4757-68)¹¹¹

In Mannyng's account, the importance of the harp as an agent of spiritual understanding is subtler than in the foregoing examples. As suggested by the lines immediately succeeding Grosseteste's speech, the harp, through its affinities with the cross, becomes a symbol of Christ's mercy and therefore an appropriate object for pious meditation:

Parfore, gode men, 3e chul lere,
Whan 3e any glemen here,
To wrshepe god at 3our power,
As dauyd seyþ yn þe sauter.
"Yn harpe, yn tabour, & symphan gle,
Wrshepe god yn trumpes and sautre. . ." [Ps. 150]
3yf 3e do þus, y seye hardyly
3e mowe here 3our mynstralsy. (4769-78)

¹¹¹ Mannyng 1983, 120.

The assertion that the song of any gleeman or minstrel should stimulate reflection in its audience is somewhat perplexing given the poem's previous criticisms of "perilous" minstrelsy. But the bishop's words provide the key to understanding the moral import of the gleeman alluded to here, namely that the instrument itself, independent of its player or occasion, signifies Christ, and its music and text therefore should be understood in this sacred and ethical context. Only in this way does harping become an honest and ethical activity, for it, like scripture, provides a locus for pious reflection, and the minstrel's lyric text therefore becomes fertile ground for spiritual truths.

In light of this moralizing of the harp and its conflation with the cross, it is not surprising to find in medieval sermons and concordances Christ himself depicted as a harpist. In an anonymous sermon from the thirteenth century, for example, both David and his harp typologically prefigure the crucified Christ. Expounding upon I Kings 16, in which David banishes with his harping the wicked spirit that plagues Saul, the author writes:

Bene nostis, fratres, quod in cithara inter duo ligna tenditur corda, sed ut bene sonet prius siccatur. Sic et Daud noster, citharoedus, cordam carnis suae in deserto ad aestum solis siccauit, quadraginta diebus et noctibus ieiunans. Nunc bene siccata in cruce sua eam extendit, et manu dilectionis cordam tetigit, et canticum amoris, uocem compassionis, sonum miserationis promisit, dicens: "Pater, ignosce illis, quia nesciunt quid faciunt." . . . Superiorem etiam cordam tetigit quando voce magna clamauit, dicens: "Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum," et haec dicens, inclinato capite, reddidit spiritum. Huius clamoris sonus acutus auditus est in mundo, et in inferno, et in coelo. . . . Abraham et alii iusti qui tenebantur apud inferos pro originali peccato audierunt et soluti

sunt, fractis cathenis eorum, et sic data est eis libertas et facultas egrediendi et ad superos ascendendi. . . . Peruenit etiam usque ad aures Dei, quo placatus omnem offensam eorum pro quibus orauit Iesus dimisit.¹¹²

[You know rightly, brothers, that in the harp is stretched a cord between two pieces of wood, but in order for it to sound well it is first dried. So also our David, harpist, dried the string of his flesh in the desert by means of the heat of the sun, fasting forty days and nights. Now he stretched it well-dried on his cross, and struck the string with the hand of love, and sent out a song of love, a voice of compassion, a sound of pity, saying, "Father, forgive them, because they know not what they do" [Lc. 23.34]. . . . He struck an even louder/higher string when he cried with great voice, saying: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," [Lk. 23.46] and saying these things, with bowed head he gave up the ghost. The sharp sound of this cry was heard on earth, and in hell, and in heaven. . . . Abraham and the other just who were held in hell for original sin heard and were freed, their fetters broken, and thus was freedom given to them and the means of moving and of ascending on high. . . . [cf. Lk. 14:10] It reached even to the ears of God, who, placated by it, dismissed every offense of those for whom Christ pleaded.]

Thus not only does the harp's music once more provide a suitable object for divine reflection, but the very act of stringing the harp becomes a moral exercise as Christ, the New David, transforms himself through his suffering into what is literally the *instrument* of man's salvation. The typological identification with David, the harper and psalmist, further reinforces Christ's musical nature. Here are all of Grosseteste's symbolic functions united: the sound of the harp both harrows hell, confounding Satan's power, and promises salvation for the faithful. The *canticum amoris*, or love song, is refashioned into a song of salvation as Christ reappropriates the harp, his suffering transforming it from an instrument of lamentation into one of

¹¹² Châtillon 1975, 254. The sermon is dubiously attributed to Walter of St. Victor.

salvation, as Baldwin of Ford maintains in a short twelfth-century treatise on the harp:

Christus resurgens ex mortuis, psalterium et cytharam suscitatur. . . . Secundum conditionem prime natiuitatis, uox hominis hec est: Vadam ad portas inferi. At si consurgimus in Christo, mox in prima resurrectione gloria nobis datur; psalterium et cythara suscitantur.¹¹³

[Rising from the dead, Christ awoke the psalter and harp. . . . According to the condition of the first Nativity, this is the voice of humanity: I shall go to the gates of hell [Is. 38:10]. But if we rise in Christ, soon glory is given to us in the first Resurrection; the psalter and harp are awakened.]

The harp therefore serves as a symbol of purity, of perfecting oneself according to Christ's exemplary life. Baldwin of Ford proceeds to allegorize the instrument as representative of the individual's spiritual state, in which we are the harp and its discordant strings reveal our own imperfections. After describing how the skillful harpist can correct sour notes by tuning, he declares that we must in a similar manner tune out our imperfections and restore our own spiritual harmony:

Ita sit in moribus nostris singulorum singulis. Sunt enim in nobis, sicut corde in cythara, sensus corporis et sensus cordis. . . . Sunt in corde uarie cogitationes et affectiones et intentiones, uaria consilia. . . et uaria desideria. . . . Hec sunt que in nobis dissonant uel consonant. . . .

Et si quid forte inordinatum uel indisciplinatum subito erumpit, aut pro memoria prisce consuetudinis, aut pro conditione humane infirmitatis, mox plectro penitentie et discipline ad rectitudinem inflectitur, ut omnia in nobis sint composita, tranquilla, et pacifica; et uni rationi cuncta obediant, donec in obedientia carnis spiritui subiecte, sicut in spirituali

¹¹³ Baldwin of Ford 1991, 30.

cythara, sit spiritualis armonia et spiritualis leticia, pax scilicet et gaudium in Spiritu sancto.¹¹⁴

[Let it be thus in our particular habits of particular things. For there are in us, just as the strings in a harp, feelings of the body and feelings of the heart. . . . There are in the heart various thoughts and affections and intentions, various judgments. . . and various desires. . . . These are the things in us which are dissonant or harmonize. . . .

And if by some chance something disorderly or undisciplined suddenly erupts [within us], whether due to the memory of old habits or the condition of human weakness, it is soon tuned back to righteousness with the pick of penitence and discipline, so that all things in us may be composed, tranquil, and peaceful; and all things may be obedient to one will, while in obedience the flesh is subject to the spirit; just as in the spiritual harp, let there be spiritual harmony and spiritual joy, namely, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.]

For Baldwin, the harp represents the rule by which we measure our own spiritual rebirth in Christ and tune out the worldly desires that can mar our progress towards everlasting life. A well-tuned individual is as much an instrument of God's truth as is scripture. We resound with the same truth because we are made in God's image, as Clement of Alexandria attests in the *Protreptikos*: "A beautiful, breathing instrument of music the Lord made man, after his own image. And He Himself also, surely, who is the supermundane Wisdom, the celestial Word, is the all-harmonious, melodious, holy instrument of God."¹¹⁵

A similar conflation of the harp with the individual Christian soul appears in a preaching handbook by Alexander of Ashby, prior of the Austin canonry at Canons Ashby at the turn of the thirteenth century.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹¹⁵ The quotation is excerpted from Holsinger 2001, 33. Holsinger's first two chapters contain numerous other early Christian examples of instruments as metaphors for the body.

In the handbook, entitled *De artificioso modo predicandi*, Alexander urges his fellow clergy to regard the souls in their care as so many strings to be tuned. Citing Gregory the Great's assertion in the *Pastoral Rule* that the same spiritual inducements do not suit all manner of men equally, he states:

Quid enim sunt intente mentes auditorum nisi quedam in cithara tensiones cordarum? Quas tangendi artifex, ut non sibimet dissimile canticum faciant, dissimiliter pulsat. Et iccirco corde consonam modulationem reddunt, quia uno quidem plectro set non uno impulsu feriuntur. Vnde, et doctor quisque, ut in una cunctos uirtute caritatis edificet ex una doctrina, non una eademque exhortatione tangere corda audientium debet.¹¹⁶

For what are the attentive minds of the listeners if not so many tunings of strings in a harp, which the harpist strikes in a dissimilar way so that they may make music not dissimilarly with themselves? And therefore they yield a melody that befits the string, because they are indeed struck with one pick but not with one [i.e. the same] blow. Wherefore also each teacher, in order to edify everyone in a single power of charity from a single doctrine, ought not to touch the hearts of listeners with one and the same exhortation.

Here at last we return to the subject of preaching. Although the harp in this example still symbolizes moral perfection in that a properly tuned audience (which Alexander earlier describes as *docilis*, *benivolens*, and *attentus*—not too dissimilar from Baldwin's *compositus*, *tranquillus*, and *pacificus*) is receptive to moral instruction, it is here the preacher and not the individual who is the *artifex* and tuner, and who must ensure that the congregation resounds with spiritual harmony, each “string” plucked in the manner most receptive to moral and spiritual perfection, whether that entails incorporating

¹¹⁶ Alexander of Ashby 2004, 27-8.

into sermons admonishments, moralized popular tales, lyrics, or other interpolations.

It is in the context of this symbolic tradition in devotional and didactic literature that we return to *Piers Plowman* and the subject of harping and lyric composition. A decidedly moralizing work such as *Piers Plowman* must also use multiple approaches in order to “touch the hearts of listeners,” and it is in this light that the poem’s lyric interpolations acquire the greatest significance. Among the most identifiable lyric passages in the poem is the springtime introduction, or *Natureingang*, with which the Prologue commences. This conventional move, in which the speaker claims his tale to be something witnessed or experienced while walking or riding outdoors, is a strategy that introduces the subsequent material as an unmediated, spontaneous experience while it is in fact precisely the opposite. Anne Middleton has compared this passage to the formulaic exordia of the *chansons d’aventure*, a generic term first proposed by E. K. Chambers to describe English lyrics which recount such personal adventures.¹¹⁷ In such poems, the springtime exordium presages a small number of potential thematic outcomes, none of which models *Piers Plowman*’s field full of folk and strongly didactic dream vision.

On account of the apparent incongruity between *Piers Plowman*’s lyrical opening and its moralizing, allegorical content, scholars have faulted the Prologue for not providing a more explicit declaration of authorial intention.¹¹⁸ In light of the larger work, the significance of

¹¹⁷ See the foregoing discussion in the Introduction.

¹¹⁸ See Chapter Three of this study, which investigates the Prologue in greater detail.

the Prologue's *Natureingang* is at best indeterminable. To appreciate this disconnect, I borrow Hans Robert Jauss's terminology, but with a significant difference. In Jauss's view, a work from its inception evokes in the reader a "horizon of expectations" to which the unfolding text is compared and which is in turn modified if textual expectations are not met. As Jauss claims in his influential essay on literary history, "A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the 'middle and end,' which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text."¹¹⁹

One can only imagine that a reader familiar with Continental lyric tropes and *chanson d'aventure* models, when first approaching *Piers Plowman*, would find the expectations of literary adventure established by the opening movement dashed before the Prologue's concluding vision of an urban merchant quarter, resulting in what Jauss calls a "horizontal shift" via the negation of familiar literary experiences. Anne Middleton's description of the expectations established by the springtime exordium, namely that it does not "forecast any particular event or content," but rather "indicates that this is a literary event

¹¹⁹ Jauss 1982, 23.

rather than an authoritative or factual discourse” is appropriate to *Piers Plowman* only to a degree, as the poem tackles sensitive, nonliterary religious and social matters with studied fervency.¹²⁰

In order to understand *Piers Plowman*’s multiple springtime exordia and the appropriateness of their lyric content to its strongly didactic tenor, I suggest we return to the passage with which we began, namely Holy Church’s injunction to Will to “preche” the truth with his harp. Given the allegorical tradition that we have recently explored, Holy Church’s reference to the harp is revealed to be a rather compact set of instructions for use. Were Will to carry out Holy Church’s injunction along the lines proposed by Alexander of Ashby, he would “tune” each string in his audience separately and in the most effective way so as to bring all of his auditors into one accord, one spiritual understanding in the frame of divine truth. The end result, we might imagine, might not look too dissimilar to the whole of *Piers Plowman* itself, with its mix of registers, languages, and discrete units. If we thus consider the whole of *Piers Plowman* to be Will’s execution of Holy Church’s exhortation, then we would be wise to keep in mind Hugh of St. Victor’s warnings that meaning is not revealed along a linear path, but rather, like the harp, in a synchrony. In order to understand a work morally and ethically, we must consider all of its parts in unison, for meaning is reciprocally created from the whole. In light of this fact, the lyric moments that introduce the Prologue and discrete visions need not supply us with the proper guidance for understanding *Piers*

¹²⁰ Middleton 1982a, 114. More accurately, it is a literary, mediated event masquerading as a real, experiential one.

Plowman's episodic content; we should not try to interpret the poem in light of the lyric exordia, but rather we should attempt to understand the lyric passages within the context of the entire poem. For the lyric, as Grosseteste's words illustrate and as Christ on the cross himself embodies, can provide a locus for moral reflection and perfection, an ultimate end in better keeping with *Piers Plowman*'s moralizing character.

As a further example of how such a lyric hermeneutics might work, let us turn to one final medieval example. The Dominican Nicholas Trevet (1261-c. 1334) describes the *causa formalis* of his commentary on the psalms (*Commentarius literalis in Psalterium iuxta Hebreos sancti Hieronymi*) in the following manner:

Item Forma consideratur in ordine partium. Sicut autem in cordis psalterii ad faciendam melodiam, non tanguntur corde secundum ordinem suum valorem, sed carptim et interpolate—nunc hic, nunc illic—sit ad Dei laudem in Psalterio non ponuntur Psalmi secundum ordinem continuum hystorie, sed carptim interponendo que postea contigerunt, nunc econtra secundum quod devotio psallentis surgebat in Dei laudem. Et iste est proprius modus eorum qui scribunt carmina, quod non secundum ordinem historie sed carptim scribant; sic Vergilius enim a medio historie incipiens, in libro Tercio redit in principium. Et ideo merito Psalmi comparantur cordis, de quibus dicitur Psalmo ultimo [150:4], “Laudate eum in cordis”. . .

[Likewise, form may be considered in the order of parts. Now just as in making melody on the strings of a psaltery, the strings are not touched successively following their places in the scale, but selectively [*carptim*], with interpolations now here and now there, so likewise Psalms to God's praise are not located in the Psalter following the unbroken narrative of a story [*secundum ordinem continuum hystorie*], but by selectively placing intermediately what deals with late events, or alternatively by following the soaring flight of the Psalmist's devotion in the

praise of God. And indeed, not to follow historical order [*non secundum ordinem historie*], but to write selectively [*carptim scribant*], is the proper mode of song-writers [*qui scribunt carmina*]. For example, Vergil after beginning at the middle of his story returns to the beginning in Book III. And so the Psalms are rightly compared to strings, about which in the last Psalm (150:4) is said, “Praise Him on strings”. . .]¹²¹

Trevet’s commentary is the first that I have discovered to marry the allegory of the harp to contemporary rhetorical theory. The idea of writing “selectively” (*carptim*) and thereby disrupting sequential narrative order is not original to Trevet, but is in fact common advice in a number of medieval preceptive grammars. The most famous treatment of the subject appears in the *Poetria nova* of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who draws the following distinction between ordering a work according to nature (*ordo naturae*) and art (*ordo artis*):

Ordo bifurcat iter: tum limite nititur artis,
Tum sequitur stratam naturae. Linea stratae
Est ibi dux, ubi res et verba sequuntur eundem
Cursum nec sermo declinat ab ordine rerum.
Limite currit opus, si praelocet aptior ordo
Posteriora prius, vel detrahat ipsa priora
Posteriora; sed in hoc, nec posteriora priori,
Ordine transposito, nec posteriore priora
Dedecus incurrunt, immo sine lite licenter
Alternas sedes capiunt et more faceto
Sponte sibi cedunt: ars callida res ita vertit,
Ut non pervertat; transponit ut hoc tamen ipso
Rem melius ponat. Civilior ordine recto
Et longe prior est, quamvis praeposterus ordo.¹²²

[The material’s order may follow two possible courses: at one time it advances along the pathway of art, at another it follows the smooth road of nature. Nature’s smooth road points the way

¹²¹ Latin and English translation from Trevet 1970, 71, 77-8.

¹²² Faral 1924, 200.

when “things” and “words” follow the same sequence, and the order of discourse does not depart from the order of occurrence. The poem travels the pathway of art if a more effective order presents first what was later in time, and defers the appearance of what was actually earlier. Now, when the natural order is thus transposed, later events incur no censure by their early appearance nor do early events by their late introduction. Without contention, indeed, they willingly assume each other’s place, and gracefully yield to each other with ready consent. Deft artistry inverts things in such a way that it does not pervert them; in transposing, it disposes the material to better effect. The order of art is more elegant than natural order, and in excellence far ahead, even though it puts last things first.]¹²³

The parallels between Geoffrey’s *ordo artis* and Trevet’s *carptim scribere* are readily apparent: both subvert the natural order of events and lend themselves to songs and artistic (i.e. un-natural) poetic forms. Among such artistic or selective works we could reasonably number *Piers Plowman*. For although *Piers Plowman* does recount Will’s visions in chronological order, its pacing is nevertheless repetitive and disjointed. Will slips constantly between waking and dreaming, imbuing the poem with two distinct and seemingly independent chronologies. The final passūs of the B- and C-texts contribute to the poem’s timeless and iterative quality, as Will and Conscience set out once more in search of answers that remain undiscovered despite the poem’s incessant inquiries. Indeed, the very existence of Langland’s multiple revisions contributes to the poem’s sense of repetitive, reiterative action. *Piers Plowman* thus presents not an *ordinem continuum historie*, the continuous narrative of a story, but rather glimpses of isolated visions that often commence *in medias res* and terminate abruptly.

¹²³ Geoffrey of Vinsauf 1967, 18-9 (with some of my minor modifications).

It is in this selective pacing that *Piers Plowman* is at its most lyrical. As we have seen in the previous chapter, lyric time is not sequential but static: a “timeless present” and not an unfolding series of events. For Trevet, this selective pacing is, importantly, definitive of the poem’s *causa formalis*, or formal cause. The *causa formalis* is a technical designation of literary form employed in the academic prologues, or *accessūs ad auctores*, to various authoritative works, including biblical texts and ancient philosophical treatises.¹²⁴ The *causa formalis* details the structure applied by the author to his work. Medieval commentators traditionally divide the formal cause into two subcategories,¹²⁵ the *forma tractatus*, or the order and arrangement of the text (the *ordine partium* for Trevet), and the *forma tractandi*, or the “writer’s method of treatment or procedure (*modus agendi* or *modus procedendi*).”¹²⁶ The *forma tractatus* primarily describes the *divisio libri*, or the work’s major principles of organization, taking into account its subdivisions into books and *capitula*. As such, the *forma tractatus* is highly tailored to the *divisio* of its particular text, only on occasion addressing the work’s rhythmic or metrical type. The *forma tractandi* is the more mutable category of the two, being less consistent in the manner of its application and often describing the nature and not the

¹²⁴ In the thirteenth century, under the influence of newly-available works such as the *Physica* and *Metaphysica*, the commentary in the *accessus* was reorganized according to the Aristotelian system of four *causae*, namely the efficient, material, formal, and final (Minnis 1988, 29). Minnis’ introduction provides a comprehensive survey of the various types of medieval academic prologues.

¹²⁵ Ward 1995 argues that, although various other structural divisions were used, the *forma tractatus* and *forma tractandi* pair prevailed because “it was standardized by Bartolinus [de Benincasa de Canulo] at Bologna, a scholastic centre which, from the later thirteenth century onwards, dominated the production of rhetorical commentaries and treatises in Europe” (72).

¹²⁶ Minnis 1988, 29.

structure of the work, such as whether it is orative, fictive, probative, etc.¹²⁷ One of the most famous medieval formulations of the *causa formalis* can be found in Dante's *Epistola a Cangrande*:

Forma vero est duplex: forma tractatus et forma tractandi. Forma tractatus est triplex, secundum triplicem divisionem. Prima divisio est, qua totum opus dividitur in tres canticas. Secunda, qua quelibet cantica dividitur in cantus. Tertia, qua quilibet cantus dividitur in rithimos. Forma sive modus tractandi est poeticus, fictivus, descriptivus, digressivus, transumptivus, et cum hoc diffinitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus, et exemplorum positivus. (IX)¹²⁸

[The form is twofold: the *forma tractatus* and the *forma tractandi*. The *forma tractatus* is threefold, according to the threefold division. The first division is that by which the entire work is divided into three canticles. The second, that by which each canticle is divided into cantos. The third, that by which each canto is divided into rhythmic units. The *forma* or *modus tractandi* is poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive, and along with this definitive, divisive, probative [i.e. demonstrative], improbative [i.e. confutational], and applies examples.]

Dante uses two sets of adjectives to define the *forma tractandi* of his *Commedia*. The first series is largely rhetorical in nature, while the second imports its terminology from medieval theories of human science and focuses on the poem's content and argument.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ "The treatment of the *forma tractandi* is subject to the personal interpretation of the commentator, since the *forma tractandi* is not an objective and obvious matter as is the *forma tractatus*. The *forma tractandi* is therefore freer than the *forma tractatus*, and sometimes has merely a conventional value. . ." Jendro-MacLennan 1974, 88.

¹²⁸ Dante Alighieri 1995, 10. Cf. "Master Jordan's" commentary on *Priscianus minor* as printed and translated by Minnis 1988, 76: "The form of treatment is the mode of proceeding which is principally definitive, divisive, probative, improbative, and applies examples; the form of the treatise is the form of the thing produced which consists in the separation of books and of chapters and the order thereof."

¹²⁹ See Minnis 1988, 122-3.

Trevet's description of the *ordo partium* of the psalms as a succession of unordered, individual poetic texts is as close as medieval commentaries approach to a theory of a lyrical mode of writing. Trevet's commentary recognizes that lyric asequence typifies a certain mode of writing that, as Geoffrey of Vinsauf reminds us, is distinct from nature and from natural order. In this sense, selective writing is not "natural" music, for it does not follow nature. Like the set themes that dominate medieval lyric poetry, it is non-mimetic and artificial, not founded in natural rhythms or experiences but mediated by artistic convention.

We have then in *Piers Plowman* a poem that avoids a rigid chronology, that is repetitive, "ending" with yet another moment of inception. We cannot make sense of such a work by following it chronologically or tracing its action from beginning to end. We must instead learn to read it less as a narrative and more as a species of Trevet's "selective" poetry, its isolated moments together contributing to a unified reading, resounding in harmony to produce a clear statement that can effect moral transformation in a properly-tuned audience. What follows in the second half of this dissertation is an attempt to uncover the harmonies of *Piers Plowman*, resounding from the work's most nonsequential, "selective" interpolations: the lyrics (a word, appropriately enough, whose etymology recalls a stringed instrument).

Chapter Three

The Experiential “I” and the Lyric Self

Our examination thus far has laid sufficient groundwork for a focused investigation of the ways in which *Piers Plowman* integrates lyric properties and traditions into its narrative structure. But before we proceed further into Langland’s poem, something must be said about the modern theories of literary convention and textual reception formulated by such medievalists as Paul Zumthor and Hans Robert Jauss that inform our understanding of how a hybrid text like *Piers Plowman* might have been received and understood by a historical audience. These theories of reception will provide the basis for the chapter’s subsequent analysis of *Piers Plowman*’s incorporation of lyric motifs.

Pierre Bec’s description of genre as a grouping of recognizable typological marks is representative of the increased emphasis in late twentieth-century theory placed on audience recognition of literary convention. Over the past several decades, various reader- and auditor-oriented reanalyses of medieval textual traditions have shifted the focus of literary generic theory from the outdated model of hierarchical taxonomies imposed by nineteenth-century positivism to a model of diachronic systems of textual continuities that continually evolve over time. Within such diachronic systems, individual texts discursively interact with those that precede them. To understand their significance, therefore, the audience must be familiar with related texts and the conventions that they employ. Paul Zumthor has

identified these recurring conventions within the literary tradition as “types”; more specifically, a type is “any element of ‘writing’ (*écriture*) that is both structured and polyvalent, having functional relationships between its parts and being indefinitely reusable in a wide variety of contexts.”¹³⁰ Types are essentially recognizable, ready-made expressions often identified in modern scholarship as motifs, clichés, topoi, key images, and so forth. They can, among other things, be stock descriptive phrases or formulae (such as the wealth of variations upon the line “he struck with his lance” in Old French epics) or recurring motifs, such as the spring exordium or *Natureingang*.

Due to their repeated use within the textual record, types, according to Zumthor, acquire an allusive meaning comprehensible only to those familiar with the larger poetic tradition in which they regularly occur:

Whether they tend to the linguistic or the figurative, types can be considered to be forms approaching as nearly as possible to the highest degree of concentration of meaning: their suggestive and allusive power is almost limitless. . . . Whatever its nature and scope the type has in fact allusive rather than descriptive power, operating as a referent, which, while it evokes a distinct entity beyond the bounds of the text (the tradition), makes that entity potentially present in its entirety within the text by means of its own action. This action might be compared to that of a pronoun within a sentence, which refers (in theory unambiguously) to a noun outside the sentence; this explains why types are not only reduced to one constituent element in poetic utterances, but are also sometimes habitually condensed to a solitary lexeme: *losengier* (scandal-monger) or *vilain* (boor) in courtly love lyrics.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Zumthor 1992, 56.

¹³¹ Ibid., 65.

For Zumthor, types are largely independent of genre; they are not determinative of a poem's taxonomical classification but instead can move from one genre to the next while preserving their reference within the larger tradition.¹³² And it is the literary tradition, a network of "paradigms and relational potentialities" endemic to poetic language that provides types with their allusive significance, thereby generating meaning.¹³³ As a "continuous and mediate text in opposition to natural language, and a center of diffusion of signification," the medieval literary tradition leads "poet and public alike into a world of convention" and affords them "an existence in it by the peculiar form of understanding it awakens."¹³⁴ Tradition represents the shared textual experience of both author and audience, a collection of conventional poetic discourse and paradigms that frames and informs any distinct poetic utterance. Zumthor elsewhere refers to this adhesion by both poet and public to a uniform system of expression as *convenance*, which, as a "kind of implicit accord between author and public" ("une sorte d'accord implicite entre chanteur et public") "implies the adhesion of the auditor to a mental and verbal universe with which style, as such, assures communication" ("implique l'adhésion de l'auditeur à un univers mental et verbal dont le style comme tel assure la communication").¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid., 67. Zumthor argues elsewhere that, while the consistent grouping of certain types can help to differentiate various "autonomous sets" such as epic, *trouvère* lyric, and fabliau, a number of other groups that share a common fund of types manifest radically different verse forms, such as the chanson, the *lai*, and the rondeau (120-1).

¹³³ Ibid., 54

¹³⁴ Ibid., 85.

¹³⁵ Zumthor 1963, 142.

The German literary historian Hans Robert Jauss has proposed an alternative model to Zumthor's notion of a continuous medieval literary tradition. His particular brand of *Rezeptionsaesthetik* (i.e. the aesthetics of reception) is based in part on the idea of a *plurale tantum*, a theory of reception that proposes that intertextuality—and not the limited scope of a single work—is constitutive of a reader's aesthetic experience. Pleasure and significance spring from the text's behavior within the broader horizons established by other contemporary works, producing a continuous variation on similar patterns.¹³⁶ For Jauss, Zumthor's notion of a static literary tradition fails to account for the *plurale tantum's* "transgressive achievement of aesthetic experience" because

the lyric experience nonetheless always goes beyond the affirmative function of once again confirming the authority of the world model as the single source of meaning. If one does not. . . take the text as an *ens causa sui*, but rather as a vehicle of communication, then the receiving subject can not only discover the genesis of new significance in the enjoyment of formal variation, but can also become aware of the difference which always arises between the poetic and the nonpoetic traditions, between the insubordination of the beautiful and the authoritative meaning of the world model.¹³⁷

A reader's experience of contemporary texts establishes horizons of expectations that are continually re-founded and altered through the ongoing process of textual reception, and by contributing to this constant variation a text is able to enrich and to surpass the very code which inspired its generation. The horizon of the expectable is

¹³⁶ Jauss 1979, 189.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 195.

therefore in constant motion: more so than Zumthor's tradition, which remains a more fixed mass of textual references that informs (but is not in turn informed by) the poetic utterance. According to Jauss, genres participate in this process of renewal, themselves constituted by horizons previously established, thereby forming a continuity founded upon the repeated correction and transformation of textual "rules of the game" (*Zusammenhang von Spielregeln*).¹³⁸ On account of the fact that the text's interaction with established convention is constitutive of meaning, both the text's author and audience must be familiar from the outset with the "rules of the game" upon which the particular text draws: "The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and 'rules of the game' familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced. Variation, extension, and correction determine the latitude of a generic structure; a break with the convention on the one hand and mere reproduction on the other determines its boundaries."¹³⁹

Scholars of medieval literature, of course, are not alone in asserting the role of convention in poetic creation or the importance of the shared textual experience between author and public. According to Fredric Jameson, genres are "essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact."¹⁴⁰ They are

¹³⁸ Jauss 1982, 79-88.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁴⁰ Jameson 1981, 106.

“institutions” because, “like other institutions of social life,” genres are “based on tacit agreements or contracts.”¹⁴¹ Whereas everyday speech acts are marked by various signals (such as the speaker’s gestures and intonation) that ensure their proper reception, literary texts must be embedded with other types of interpretative cues: “In the mediated situations of a more complicated social life—and the emergence of writing has often been taken as paradigmatic of such situations—perceptual signals must be replaced by conventions if the text in question is not to be abandoned to a drifting multiplicity of uses.”¹⁴² Generic conventions, as socially- and historically-defined constructs, provide the necessary framework to direct the audience’s response to a given text: “It is of course the generic convention which is called upon to perform this task, and to provide a built-in substitute for those older corrections and adjustments which are possible only in the immediacy of the face-to-face situation.”¹⁴³ A work’s generic categorization then, provided that it can be properly determined by the audience, ideally restricts its interpretative possibilities and excludes undesirable responses to the text.¹⁴⁴

Yet despite their role as mediators in Jameson’s system, genres, as he later describes them, are not unambiguous categories, but rather accrued compounds of forms and symbols. According to this “sedimentary” view of genre, generic structures, as they develop diachronically, are reappropriated and reformed in different social and

¹⁴¹ Jameson 1975, 135. See also Jameson 1981, 106-7.

¹⁴² Jameson 1981, 106.

¹⁴³ Jameson 1975, 135.

¹⁴⁴ Jameson 1981, 106-7.

historical contexts, thereby accumulating ideological residue from each historical concretization, carrying these heterogeneous messages and themes forward like so much layered sediment: “This notion of the text as a synchronic unity of structurally contradictory or heterogeneous elements, generic patterns and discourses (what we may call, following Ernst Bloch, the *Ungleichzeitigkeit* or synchronic ‘uneven development’ within a single textual structure) now suggests that even [Northrop] Frye’s notion of displacement can be rewritten as a conflict between the older deep-structural form and the contemporary materials and generic systems in which it seeks to inscribe and to reassert itself.” But this uneven development takes its toll on the clarity of generic messages: “This ideology of form itself, thus sedimented, persists into the later, more complex structure as a generic message which coexists—either as a contradiction or, on the other hand, as a mediatory or harmonizing mechanism—with elements from later stages.”¹⁴⁵ If each genre, in any given historical moment, negotiates in this manner between contemporary materials and the deeper structure of its diachronic development, then the question must be asked how the contractual agreement between a writer and a specific audience is to avoid ambiguity or the possibility (and validity) of variant readings based upon alternative generic messages.

According to Jauss, a reader removed from the text’s historical moment of creation, who is separated from the text by a long tradition of diachronic development as Jameson postulates, must overcome the barriers to reception by placing himself “within the expectation implied

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 141.

by the text” and recognize “in which direction the rules of the genre are pointing.”¹⁴⁶ Because the alterity of a text can detract from aesthetic pleasure and ultimately interfere with the text’s disclosure of significance, the reader who encounters a text after the era of its composition must strive to reconstruct the “horizon of expectation of the addressees for whom the text was originally composed.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, we as modern readers must acquaint ourselves with both the “rules of the game” that informed the text’s creation and also the range of other works within which the text can be demonstrated with reason to invoke. If the texts’ original addressees constructed meaning, as many of these scholars suggest, via an intertextual process in which the newly-discovered texts are implicitly compared with similar works within the established tradition, then the readerly acts of interpretation and comprehension are dependent upon literary conventions contemporary with the composed work and the *ensembles structurés* which they imply. The previous chapter’s outline of a lyric hermeneutics was one attempt at uncovering an interpretative framework embedded in *Piers Plowman* and signaled via intertextual cues.

The precise generic membership that we assign to a particular medieval poem is therefore less important than the qualities that it shares in common with numerous other related and contemporary texts. What must be established in order to understand how a poem might have been received and understood by its contemporary or later

¹⁴⁶ Jauss 1979, 186.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 182.

audiences are the numerous axes along which the poem intersects the larger body of texts (as best as they can be reconstructed) with which its audience would likely have been familiar. A study of medieval lyric is therefore a study of conventionality, of prominent types and characteristics and the numerous ways in which they are adapted and reappropriated for use within the extant medieval tradition.

To return again to *Piers Plowman*, we may best begin to uncover its multiple intersections with the types and conventions of medieval lyric poetry by starting where so many scholars have suggested: at the beginning. In his recent study *The Book of the Incipit*, D. Vance Smith characterizes *Piers Plowman*'s Prologue as "muted, truncated, and unspectacular," and he faults Langland for his failure to comply with the prescriptions of medieval *artes incipiendi*, which generally specify that a work's *principium* should be persuasive, authoritative, and, importantly, indicative of the work's overall theme and structure. In other words, according to medieval precepts, the introductory lines of a written work should provide the reader or listener with a clear sense of its goals and structure:

The author's anticipation of the audience's reaction dictates the shape of the material: the beginning should collect together the authoritative and persuasive points of the following discourse. All of these *artes incipiendi* agree on the same basic point: that a work that has a weak beginning—whether it is weak structurally, rhetorically, affectively, or performatively—will probably not end successfully. . . . And most important, it will not effect the necessary beginning in its audience, starting the process that will allow the audience to make the discourse its own. . . . The poem's first dream is partly concerned with the very conception of the poem: it is partly the narration of its own

invention. . . . The first part of the first dream becomes a dream of the beginning, a dream about what should have already taken place—the process of invention. Only after the dream has begun does any indication of the poem appear.¹⁴⁸

Smith identifies Will's first vision, which occurs about a dozen lines into the Prologue, as a belated and rather unsatisfactory introduction to the poem's main themes and intentions. In fact, he argues, only the Prologue to the C-text provides any type of "précis or thema," which "replaces some of the topographical details of the waking moments in the A and B versions" and approaches the expository *principium* recommended by medieval preceptive grammars and *artes incipiendi*. In this text alone does Will come close to revealing the poem's intention or structure (*forma tractandi*):

Al þe welth of the world and þe wo bothe,
Wynkyng as hit were, witterliche y sigh hit;
Of treuthe and tricherye, resounn and gyle,
Al y say slepynge as y shal 3ow telle. (C.Prol.10-3)

What is unusual about this passage, and what Smith rightly identifies, is that Will announces his intentions only after the narrative action of the poem has commenced. Unlike his contemporary John Gower, who opens his *Confessio Amantis* with a prologue that establishes both the theme and *modus agendi* of the work ("I wold go the middel weie / And wryte a bok between the tweie / Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore. . .")¹⁴⁹ or Geoffrey Chaucer, whose *House of Fame* commences with an elaborate proem and invocation, Langland eschews any preliminary discussion of his poem's purpose or theme, refraining in

¹⁴⁸ Smith 2001, 63-64.

¹⁴⁹ Gower 2000, 1:65-66.

the Prologue from referring to the act of composition. Instead, the poem begins immediately with Will's wanderings in the "somer seson" that preface his first vision.

The entirety of *Piers Plowman* is thus the record of the experiences of one fictive persona, while the literary framework in which he appears is almost entirely stripped of references to his fictiveness or to the acts of the poem's composition or interpretation; the result is a work that must communicate meaning to its public via other implicit channels. Smith locates that meaning in the form of the dreams themselves: "Langland's reiteration of the fact of sleeping in lines 10 and 12 [of the C-text] suggests that the mode of the dream itself is at least as important as its content. In none of the versions does he say anything about the dream before he describes falling asleep and beginning the actual dream. . . . The beginning of the first vision narrates, in part, the process of the poem's invention, the discovery of its conception."¹⁵⁰ The implicit association between *Piers Plowman* and other medieval dream narratives must certainly have been recognized to some degree by the poem's intended audience.

But we need not proceed straight into Will's first vision in order to determine the poem's theme and structure. Where Smith omits to look for more clues as to *Piers Plowman's forma tractandi* or *thema* is the opening waking introduction that precedes the first vision: a passage that, through its position as the *principium* for the entire poem, is a natural and reasonable candidate for investigation. A poem, after all, need not have as explicative an introduction as an

¹⁵⁰ Smith 2001, 66-67.

accessus ad auctores—a formalized academic prologue common in medieval treatises and commentaries¹⁵¹—for its meaning or significance to be intuited; rather, as the foregoing discussion of textual reception has in part demonstrated, the poem’s visible relationship to other literary forms and conventions, as evidenced through its structure, theme, and use of various types, can help to specify its proper use.

Let us for a moment, then, consider the opening lines of *Piers Plowman*’s Prologue, the conventions that they employ, and their significance in light of the interpretative models that we have so far reviewed.

In a somer seson whan softe was þe sonne,
I shoop me into a shroud as I a sheep weere;
In habite as an heremite, vnholy of werkes,
Wente wide in þis world wondres to here.
Ac on a May morwenyng on Maluerne hilles
Me bifel a ferly, of Fairye me þoste.
I was very forwandred and wente me to reste
Vnder a brood bank by a bourne syde,
And as I lay and lenede and loked on þe watres,
I slombred into a slepyng, it sweyed so murye. (B.Prol.1-10)

As we have seen in the previous chapter, these lines, with their references to the May season and to wandering in search of adventures or “wondres,” are exemplary of the conventional springtime introduction (also known as the *reverdie* or *Natureingang*) common to medieval lyric forms such as the *chansons d’amour* of the *trouvères* or the *cansos* of the troubadours and *trobairitz*. To adopt Paul Zumthor’s terminology, the *Natureingang* is a “type” endemic to a number of

¹⁵¹ See the discussion in Chapter Two.

related genres; it therefore always alludes to a coherent set of themes extant within the larger literary tradition. In medieval poems containing a springtime exordium, the natural world often occasions poetic composition and provides the speaking subject with either the potential for adventure or a stimulus for reflection upon his or her (often amorous) situation. These themes were perfected in the Continental lyrics of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and eventually made their way into the English vernacular, where they enjoyed no small success in late-medieval lyric and popular romance and largely maintained their allusive significance within the literary tradition.

Among the most famous and influential of the medieval May exordia is the opening to Guillaume de Lorris' early thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, which, like *Piers Plowman*, is also a dream vision:

Au vuintieme an de mon aage,
 Ou poin qu'amors prent le peage
 Des joenes genz, couchier m'aloie
 Une nuit si com je soloie,
 Et me dormoie mout forment.
 Si vi un songe en mon dormant
 Qui mout fu biaux et mout me plot. . .
 Avis m'estoit qu'il iere mays
 Il a ja bien .v. anz ou mais.
 Qu'en may estoie ce sonjoie,
 Ou tens amoureux pleins de joie,
 Ou tens que toute riens s'esgaye,
 Que l'en ne voit boisson ne haie
 Qui en may parer ne se vueille
 Et covrir de nouvelle fueille. . .
 Mout a dur cuer qui en may n'aime,
 Quant il ot chanter sor la raimie
 As oissiaus les douz chanz piteus. (21-7; 45-52; 81-3)¹⁵²

¹⁵² Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun 1992, 42-6.

[In the twentieth year of my life
 At the moment when Love takes tribute
 From young people, I went to sleep
 One night as I was accustomed to
 And slept very deeply.
 I then had a dream while sleeping
 Which was very beautiful and pleasing. . .
 It seemed to me that it was May
 Five or more years ago.
 I dreamed that it was May
 During the amorous season, filled with joy,
 The time when everything rejoices,
 When one sees no bush or hedge
 That in May does not wish to array itself
 And cover [itself] with new foliage. . .
 He has a very hard heart who does not love
 In May, when he hears the birds on the
 Branch singing sweet, plaintive songs.]

Whereas *Piers Plowman*'s narrator, Will, wanders outdoors only to fall asleep surrounded by the verdant blooming of the May season, the dreamer in the *Roman de la Rose* re-experiences a May season from years ago *after* falling asleep one night according to his usual custom. In the former, the May season is but a brief prologue to the substance of the dream; in the latter, it comprises the matter of the dream entirely. In fact, Will only stops to contemplate the green season around him in those rare moments between visions during which he finds himself awake, such as in the beginning of Passus 8 when Will heeds birdsong momentarily before falling into yet another slumber:

Thus I wente widewher dowe to seke,
 And as I wente by a wode, walkyng myn one,
 Blisse of the briddes abide me made,
 And vnder a lynde vpon a launde lened I a stounde
 To lerne þe layes þat louely foweles made.
 Murþe of hire mouþes made me to slepe;

The merueillouseste metels mette me þanne
That ever dremed driht in doute, as I wene. (8.62-9)

The birdsong, as it did for the *Rose's* dreamer and so many troubadours before him, does not inspire Will to contemplate romantic love, but instead—as is the case for Will's other activities in the waking world—functions as a soporific. It is almost as if Will is unable to remain in the world of secular romance, his momentary interludes there serving only as fragmentary glimpses into a life more invested in visions. The fact that the poem on the whole eschews the erotic idiom that so commonly accompanies the *Natureingang* in medieval French and English literature makes its inclusion in the Prologue all the more curious.

According to the theories of reception that we have reviewed, a poem communicates its significance via recognizable conventions. But as we shall see, *Piers Plowman's* use of lyric conventions is rarely so straightforward. Because of its conventional role in medieval romance and lyric as a precursor to some sort of literary adventure,¹⁵³ it is likely that the May introduction would generate in contemporary audiences a set of expectations developed from their familiarity with works similar in form and theme. According to Zumthor, a poem's introductory lines establish the tenor for the entire work and fix the theme by which the entire poem should be understood: the theme is “the initial assertion that ‘maps out’ the text in accordance with a general tendency of medieval art, in which the tenor, the porch, and

¹⁵³ See Middleton 1982a.

the opening sentence, which are *always highly formalized*, fix the semantic axis of the work. This axis determines the subsequent meanings displayed in the text.”¹⁵⁴

Yet if *Piers Plowman*’s semantic axis is fixed from the beginning at the highly formalized and poetic level of the springtime exordium, this axis fails to account for the final lines of the Prologue, which interrupt the high poetic register with fragments of popular song and the cries of street vendors and inn-keepers:

Barons and Burgeises and bondage als
I sei3 in þis assemblee, as ye shul here after.
Baksteres and Brewesteres and Bochiers manye,
Wollen webbesters and weueres of lynnyn,
Taillours, Tynkers and Tollers in Markettes,
Masons, Mynours and many opere craftes;
Of alle kynne lybbynge laborers lopen forþ somme—
As dykeres and delveres þat doon hire dede ille
And dryueþ forþ þe long day with “*Dieu save Dame Emme*”¹⁵⁵
Cokes and hire knaues cryden, “hote pies, hote!
Goode gees and grys! go we dyne, go we!”
Tauerners til hem tolden þe same:
“Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoigne,
Of þe Ryn and of þe Rochel, þe roost to defie!”
Al þis I sei3 slepyng and seuene sythes more. (Prol.217-31)

The litany of vocations, the reference to song, and the shouts from the street describe a bustling urban scene, not the usual idealized setting of a romance. At the close of the Prologue, then, we are not led “into a world of convention,” as Zumthor would describe it, but rather into the practical world: an unusual destination for a text that commences with a springtime exordium. This disappointment of the generic

¹⁵⁴ Zumthor 1992, 6 (emphasis added).

¹⁵⁵ “God save Lady Emma”

expectations engendered by the poem's conventional opening results in Jauss' "horizontal shift," where the horizon of expectations established by the poem's exordium is not met by the ensuing narrative action.

Were we, like David in Conscience's exemplum, to "assoileth," or resolve, the Prologue's opening lines ourselves, to turn the leaf and complete the lines of the springtime introduction according to conventional models, we likely would not find ourselves in a crowded marketplace. The snatches of daily dialog with which the Prologue concludes are not endemic to the refined poetic idiom but rather are more constitutive of real, everyday language—closer, perhaps, to what Zumthor refers to as "practical" language, the system to which the poetic tradition is opposed:

Poetic language and practical language are . . . opposed to each other, appearing as two semiological systems more clearly distinguished from each other in the Middle Ages than at any other period; poetic language is not an interpreted version of natural language. . . rather it is poetic language itself that does the interpreting. Medieval poetry not only escapes experiential determinism but substitutes for it its own mode of being, in which facts take on an aura of secondary values, confirmed and evaluated (so to speak) in the registers of a homogeneous tradition.¹⁵⁶

Because cries such as "hote pies, hotel!" have little reference within the register of poetic language to which the *Natureingang* belongs, they have no "allusive" power to invoke in the realm of court literature and therefore fail to generate meaning for the audience via the recognition of inscribed literary types. Langland is no longer, as he did with the

¹⁵⁶ Zumthor 1992, 85.

springtime exordium, referencing a singular, established literary tradition, but is instead linking his poetry to something much closer to real, lived experience.

I argued in the first chapter of this study that medieval lyric is not particularly mimetic of a personal experience, being more invested in established literary traditions than the Wordsworthian “influxes of feelings,” the recollection of things felt and experienced. Yet in the course of the Prologue, Langland moves from the abstract, formulaic opening that signals the poem as a highly-formalized literary *aventure* to a much more cosmopolitan scene: a blending of popular song and direct experience. But this movement away from the conventional lyric imagery with which the poem opens does not represent a complete abandonment of the lyrical stance. After all, the initial claims towards an experiential literature made in the opening *Natureingang* still hold in these final moments of the Prologue. “The significance of the vision,” Vance Smith argues, “is impressed upon the dreamer’s *senses* before it is impressed upon his *intellect*.”¹⁵⁷ Will’s experience is still primarily sensory and his words remain experiential and personal, but the nature of the vision has changed. The narrative has quit romantic literary convention to dwell upon the unmediated imagery of an urban street.

To make better sense out of the Prologue’s abrupt break with convention, let us apply our theory of lyric hermeneutics and consider at length the status of experiential lyric conventions in two later

¹⁵⁷ Smith 2001, 66 (emphasis added).

passages, namely Will's conversation with Imaginative and his experience at Conscience's dinner. By striking a chord, so to speak, and reading these three disconnected passages in synchrony, we can hopefully uncover an internal cohesiveness to *Piers Plowman's* incorporation of lyric poetics. We shall then at last return to a consideration of the Prologue.

As has been previously remarked during the course of this study, the realm of personal experience, of the sensory impression that Smith observes in the Prologue, is often understood by literary scholars to comprise the realm of the lyric. As Sylvia Huot claims in her study of lyrico-narrative hybrid texts (of which *Piers Plowman*, I would submit, is a special category),

For the *trouvère*, to sing and to love are complementary facets of a single activity, and the song records the event of its own making. Similarly, a lyrical romance or dit frequently records the event of its composition or transcription, and sometimes both, portraying poetic composition as a form of love service. . . . Equally important is the issue of medium. Whereas the twelfth-century romance narrator explicitly presented himself as heir to a long-established written tradition, the twelfth-century *trouvère* was explicitly a singer, whose songs derived from his own personal experience rather than from books. The evolution of the lyrical romance and dit entailed a progressive redefinition of lyric poetry as a written medium and of lyric discourse and thematics as appropriate to a writerly narrative format, as well as the identification of an explicitly written literary tradition conjoining lyric and narrative poetics.¹⁵⁸

Huot's distinction between sources is a useful one for our purposes. For implicit in both of these points is the disparity between the roles of personal experience and literary tradition in the act of composition:

¹⁵⁸ Huot 1987, 2.

between what is actually experienced by the author or narrator and what is gleaned and borrowed from an established literary record. The lyric, she argues here, is born from experience: an assertion, as we saw in the first chapter of this dissertation, closely tied to the notion that the lyric is the proper outlet for subjective, emotional content. The narrative's foundation, on the other hand, is the written word: it builds upon other literary works instead of mimetically relating the author's lived experiences.

It is on account of these distinctions that Huot defines the dream vision such as what Will experiences as a peculiarly lyrical narrative form. In her discussion of Guillaume de Lorris' section of the *Roman de la Rose*, she claims that "The dream, in fact, is a lyrico-narrative construct. Guillaume's narrator does mediate between his audience and a text, but that text is not found in a book; it is experienced in a vision. Thus, he does also reveal to us his personal experience, but that experience is located in the past."¹⁵⁹ The conceit of the narrative voice in the dream vision is that the dream was personally experienced, and hence the recounting of it is the recounting of the poem's actual creation, or the "event of its own making." Indeed, such would seem to be the case of the dreamer/narrator Will of *Piers Plowman*, who is counseled at one point by Lewte to "reden. . . in Retorik," or to transpose into poetry, his vision (11.102). Lewte earlier heartily supports Will's exclamation that "If I dorste. . . amonges men þis metels auowe!" (11.86), or that he will declare his dream to men, given the opportunity. The text of *Piers Plowman* itself

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 86.

is the fulfillment of this declaration, Will's recording of what we are meant to believe are his own, unmediated dream experiences.

We must be cautious, however, not to insist too heavily upon the personal nature of the experiences recounted in the *Roman de la Rose* and *Piers Plowman*. Although both narrators claim to record personal experiences not found in any book, such a stance is highly conventional in medieval literature, especially by the latter half of the fourteenth century when Langland composed his poem. Will's claims to the authenticity of his dream allude to numerous other visions like the *Rose* that similarly insist upon the fiction of authentic personal experience, of a real narrator with an existence outside of the poem's framework.¹⁶⁰ Like the *Rose*, *Piers Plowman* asserts the unmediated and spontaneous quality of the dream while in the same breath betraying its literary heritage with the use of types such as the *Natureingang* with which the poem commences. In so doing, both narratives follow the lead of medieval lyric, which is heavily mediated by various writerly traditions despite its experiential form and its affectation of individual expression.

This dichotomy of mediated and unmediated experience, similar to the distinction Huot draws between the written tradition and personal, sensory experience as sources for composition, is advanced by Imaginative in Passus 12 as the fundamental difference between *clergie* and *kynde wit*. In the midst of his long debate with Will,

¹⁶⁰ A claim especially complicated in the *Rose* by the advent of a second author, Jean de Meun, who maintains the persona of the narrator, Amant, even after the change in authorship has been revealed.

Imaginative distinguishes between two sources of knowledge, namely that which we experience ourselves and that which we learn through teaching and reading:

“Clergie and kynde wit comeþ of siste and techyng,
As þe book bereth witesse to burnes þat kan rede:
*Quod scimus loquimur, quod vidimus testamur.*¹⁶¹
Of *quod scimus* comeþ Clergie, a konnyng of heuene,
And of *quod vidimus* comeþ kynde wit, of siste of diuerse peple.”
(12.64-8)

Imaginative’s discrimination between the personal, subjective experience of “diuerse peple” and the “techyng” gleaned from written sources recalls Huot’s bifurcated definition of the lyric as inherently self-reflective, born from those events that we witness (*quod vidimus*), while the narrative develops out of an established literary tradition.

But *clergie*, according to Imaginative, is more than the sum total of all written records. It does not proceed merely from human intellectual history, but rather has its ultimate source in the divine:

“For as a man may nozt see þat mysseþ hise eizen,
Na moore kan no Clerk but if he cauhte it first þoruþ bokes.
Alþouþ men made bokes þe maister was god,
And seint Spirit þe Samplarie, and seide what men sholde write.
And riht as siht serueþ a man to se þe heize strete
Riht so lereþ lettrure lewed men to Reson.
And as a blynd man in bataille bereþ wepne to fiste,
And hap noon hap wiþ his ax his enemy to hitte,
Na moore kan a kynde witted man, but clerkes hym teche,
Come for al his kynde wit to cristendom and be saued;”
(12.99-108)

Clergie, or the divine learning collected in books, must temper the experiential *kynde wit* that all *lewed men* acquire through their lived

¹⁶¹ “We speak what we know [and] we testify what we have seen” (Jn 3:11).

experiences. By glossing the *kynde wit* of the unlettered with *clergie*, clerks ensure the salvation of humankind.¹⁶²

In a similar manner, Will's *kynde wit*—formed from the experiences that in turn comprise his dream vision—must also be embroidered with *clergie*, glossed with the clerical knowledge of the written tradition so as to temper his inherently lyrical experiences with divine wisdom. In this sense, the creation of the hybrid text, the fusing of the experienced with the written tradition, is not only useful but necessary to a didactic verse form.

As an example of the dangers of the pure lyric, experiential form, let us consider Will's two similar visions of Middle-Earth (or the human world) in Passus 11. This passus describes two parallel moments during which all of Middle-Earth is revealed to Will for contemplation. In the first instance Fortune ravishes Will and presents the earth as a source of worldly joys:

A merueillous metels mette me þanne,
For I was rauysshed riȝt þere; Fortune me fette
And into þe lond of longyng and loue she me brouȝte,
And in a Mirour þat hiȝte middelerþe she made me biholde.
Siþen she seide to me, "here myȝtow se wondres
And knowe þat þow coueitest, and come þerto paraunter."
(11.6-11)

The phrase "lond of longygne and loue" recalls the lyric world created by the troubadours or by romances such as the *Roman de la Rose* in which nearly all activity is directed towards the securing of love.¹⁶³ By

¹⁶² For more on God as the primary efficient cause, see Minnis 1988.

¹⁶³ Critics have identified the phrase "land of longyng" as a poetic "signature" revealing the true identity of the poet William "Langland." In a later passus, the dreamer Will provides another signature in the form of an anagram: "I haue lyued in londe . . . my name is longe wille" (15.152). Regardless of its potential function as a

presenting the earth to Will as a means of achieving his desires, Fortune interprets the world for him, detailing its true significance as one would gloss a text. And the world in *Piers Plowman* is indeed a text, for Will experiences it personally and transposes his adventures there into verse. Whereas his visions of the earth throughout the poem rarely lack a gloss (consider Holy Church's explanation of the "feld ful of folk" in Passus 1), here Fortune presents the realm of earthly experience as exactly what it seems: a land of love and longing, of emotional encounters; a land, simply put, of personal lyric adventure.

signal for the author, the use of "longing" in such a romantic context is not unusual in Middle English. In *The Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*, a gaze from the weeping Polyxena makes Achilles "langwys in Loue & Longynges grete" (Panton and Donaldson 1869, 297, v.9154), while in *The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, Guy listens so intently to the sound of birdsong in the May forest that he "þou3t he was in gret longing," and becomes so distracted that he loses his way and encounters a strange knight (Auchinleck MS. 4520; Zupitza 1887, 258).¹⁶³ The possible association of the author's name with this *topos* of longing situates the poet in this realm of romance and sensuous imagery. It is worth noting that the original Old French text for *Guy of Warwick* lacks a word that corresponds directly to "longyng"; rather, Guy suffers from a consuming contemplation:

E il voldra un poi atendre
 Pur oir les oisels chanter,
 En ço se pot il deliter.
 E il se sunt el chemin mis,
 E il en la forest est sul remis;
 Des oisels oi les duz chanz.
 Entrez est en un penser granz,
 De penser si esgara,
 De sun chemin en altre entra; (4552-60) (Ewert 1932, 1:139)

[And he will want to wait a little to hear the birds sing, in which he could delight himself. And they placed themselves on the path, and he has remained alone in the forest; he heard the sweet song of the birds. He became lost as a result of thinking; from his road he entered another.]

Cf. also the Harley lyric that begins "Wiþ longyng y am lad / on molde y waxe mad / a maide marreþ me" (Brook 1948, 34).

Will's pursuits of Fortune and pleasure, however, result in moral and intellectual bankruptcy, and after he has belatedly discovered the error of his ways, Will is called by Kynde to look again at Middle-Earth:

And slepyng I sei3 al þis; and siþen cam kynde
And nempned me by my name and bad me nymen hede,
And þoru3 þe wondres of this world wit for to take.
And on a mountaigne þat myddelerþe histe, as me þo þouste,
I was fet forþ by ensamples¹⁶⁴ to knowe,
Thorough ech a creature kynde my creatour to louye. (11.321-6)

The vision of the world this time is presented with a different *intentio*: to demonstrate to Will via *ensamples* the importance of loving God. Unlike Fortune's previous representation of the earth as the land of longing and love, Kynde's vision begins with an encompassing view of the world and then moves onto particular details and phenomena which are transformed into lyric sentiment by Will's subjective experiencing of them, as his repeated use of the phrase "I saw" indicates:

I sei3 þe sonne and þe see and þe sond after,
And where þat briddes and beestes by hir make þei yeden,
Wilde wormes in wodes, and wonderful foweles
Wiþ fleckede feþeres and of fele colours.
Man and his make I myzte se boþe;
Pouerte and plentee, boþe pees and werre,
Blisse and bale bothe I sei3 at ones,
And how men token Mede and Mercy refused. (11.327-34)

This passage commences with a typical romantic litany of nature's creatures. But whereas the image of a bird in flight compels a lyric poet such as Bernart de Ventadorn to contemplate his own romantic

¹⁶⁴ I use the well-attested variant reading "ensamples" instead of "forbisenens" printed in the Athlone edition.

situation, as does the lark in “Can vei la lauzeta mover” (“When *I* see the lark moving”), here the nature introduction does not lead into the inner world of courtly convention but rather (much like the Prologue) into the greater realm of human industry, where contradictory abstractions such as poverty and plenty dominate the human condition.

This break with typical romantic and lyric thematics continues as Will contemplates the figure of Reason and his role in the greater world:

Reson I sei3 sooply sewen alle beestes,
In etynge, in drynkynge and in engendrynge of kynde.
And after cours of concepcion noon took kepe of ooper,
As whan þei hadde ryde in Rotey tyme anoon reste þei after;
Males drowen hem to males al mornynge by hemselue,
And femelles to femelles ferded and drowe.
Ther ne was cow ne cowkynde þat conceyved hadde
That wolde bere after bole, ne boor after sowe;
Boþe hors and houndes and alle opere beestes
Medled noȝt wiþ hir makes, saue man allone. (11.335-44)

Following this passage is a close inspection of birds and their industry, which Will contrasts with man’s feeble accomplishments (Briddes I biheld þat in buskes made nestes; / Hadde neuere wye wit to werche þe leeste. [11.345-6]). The consideration of these scenes of natural procreation and activity does not lead into further romantic speculation: Will does not begin here to assess his own sexual pursuits in parallel with the natural imagery. Rather, the scene sets up an implicit comparison between animal and human habits not too dissimilar from that found in book I, chapter 5 of Saint Augustine’s *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*:

copulatio itaque maris et feminae generandi causa bonum est naturale nuptiarum. sed isto bono male utitur qui bestialiter utitur, ut sit eius intentio in uoluptate libidinis, non in uoluntate propaginis, quamquam in nonnullis animalibus rationis expertibus, sicut in plerisque alitibus, et coniugiorum quaedam quasi confoederatio custoditur et socialis nidificandi sollertia uicissim que ouorum dispertita tempora fouendorum et nutriendorum opera alterna pullorum magis eas uideri faciunt agere, cum coeunt, negotium substituendi generis quam explendae libidinis. quorum duorum illud est in pecore simile hominis, hoc in homine simile pecoris.¹⁶⁵

The union, then, of male and female for the purpose of procreation is the natural good of marriage. But he makes a bad use of this good who uses it bestially, so that his intention is on the gratification of lust, instead of the desire of offspring. Nevertheless, in sundry animals unendowed with reason, as, for instance, in most birds, there is both preserved a certain kind of confederation of pairs, and a social combination of skills in nest-building; and their mutual division of the periods for cherishing their eggs and their alternation in the labor of feeding their young, give them the appearance of so acting, when they mate, as to be intent rather on securing the continuance of their kind than on gratifying lust. Of these two, the one is the likeness of man in a brute; the other, the likeness of the brute in a man.¹⁶⁶

Whereas Augustine claims that birds and beasts lack reason, and thus their understanding of the true purpose of sexual activity casts human lasciviousness in an even poorer light, Kynde's vision of Middle-Earth suggests the opposite: Reason follows all creatures save humankind alone.

Or this, at least, is how Will interprets the vision he has been granted: a reading that is somewhat contrary to the stated *intentio* of the vision, which was to learn to love God. His observations of nature

¹⁶⁵ Augustine 1902.

¹⁶⁶ Augustine 1987, 265.

move Will, as they would any good lyric poet, but once more Will breaks with troubadour convention by castigating Reason for allowing humankind to pursue sexual desires recklessly:

Ac þat moost meued me and my mood chaunged,
That Reson rewarded and ruled alle beestes
Saue man and his make; many tymes me þouzte
No Reson hem ruled, neiþer riche ne pouere.
Thanne I rebukede Reson and rist til hym I seyde,
“I have wonder in my wit, þat witty art holden,
Why þow ne sewest man and his make þat no mysfeet hem
folwe.” (11.369-75)

But Will’s accusation is rash, informed only by his vision of Middle-Earth and not tempered by any clerical learning, as Imaginative’s later reprimand makes clear:

“Haddestow suffred,” he seide, “slepyng þo þow were,
Thow sholdest haue knowen þat clergie kan and conceyued
moore þoruþ Reson,
For Reson wolde haue reherced þee rist as Clergie seide;
Ac for þyn entremetyng here artow forsake:
*Philosophus esses, si tacuisses.*¹⁶⁷ (11.413-6a)

Will’s misreading of Kynde’s vision is therefore due to a lack of *clergie*, for like a “dronken daffe,” Will “of clergie ne of his counseil. . . counteþ nozt a risshe” (11.427, 430). Will, claims Imaginative, can only exercise *kynde wit*, the processing of experiences and sensory perceptions that Huot identifies as the heart of lyric expression:

“For Clergie is kepere vnder crist of heuene;
Was þer neuere kyng ne knyzt but clergie hym made.
Ac kynde wit comeþ of all kynnes siztes,
Of briddes and of beestes, of blisse and of sorwe.”¹⁶⁸ (12.126-9)

¹⁶⁷ “You would have been a philosopher if you had been silent.”

¹⁶⁸ Schmidt 1995 prints the variant reading “of blisse and sorwe” from Cambridge UL

Kynde's vision of Middle-Earth was indeed of birds and beasts, bliss and sorrow, but Will lacked the proper apparatus to understand these symbols properly: his *kynde wit* alone was not sufficient, and therefore the lyric utterance produced by his experiences was inherently flawed. As a result, Will has failed as a poet: "Only clerics, as Imaginative sees them, are poets. Kynde-witted men *may* develop a reflexive attitude toward the imagery in their mind, but more often they confine themselves to their delight with *sensibilia*. . . . 'Catel and kynde witte' encumber 'hem alle.'" ¹⁶⁹ Will succeeds in moving beyond the typical romantic impulse of contemplating his own amorous situation when confronted with his vision of the natural world, but he simultaneously fails to understand the phenomena in his vision as *signs* pointing to greater meaning.

As Britton Harwood has shown, Imaginative must demonstrate how properly to read sense impressions, or *sensibilia*, as signs or *similitudes*: "Although Will did not see in the birds what Imaginative wished him to, Imaginative himself demonstrates how the imaginative power—the power to take a visual image as similitude—can, properly guided, produce 'clergy' out of natural objects." ¹⁷⁰ Thus Imaginative narrates for Will another short vision of birds and beasts, this time indicating from the start their role as "ensamples":

Ac of briddes and of beestes men by olde tyme
 Ensamples token and termes, as telleþ þise poetes,

MS Dd. 1.17. The Athlone text prints the better-attested "[by] tastes of truþe," which Schmidt prints on the following line as "Of tastes of truthe and of deceites."

¹⁶⁹ Harwood 1975, 257.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 256.

And þat þe faireste fowel foulest engendreþ,
 And feblest fowel of flist is þat fleep or swymmeþ.
 And þat is þe pecok and þe Pehem wiþ hir proude feþeres
 Bitokneþ riȝt riche men þat reigne here on erþe.
 For pursue a pecok or a pehen to cacche,
 They may noȝt flee fer ne ful heize neiþer;
 For þe trailynge of his tail ouertaken is he soone.
 And his flessch is foul flessch and his feet boþe,
 And vnlouelich of ledene and loop for to here. (12.236-46)

These men of ancient times were “poets” in that they recognized the symbolic function of these images.¹⁷¹ After supplying the vision, Imaginative demonstrates the *clergie* gleaned when such symbols are understood:

Right so þe riche, if he is richesse kepe
 And deleþ it noȝt til his deep day, þe taille is al of sorwe.
 Riȝt as þe pennes of þe pecok peyneþ hym in his flist,
 So is possession peyne of pens and of nobles
 To all hem þat it holdeþ til hir tail be plukked.
 And þouȝ þe riche repente þanne and birewe þe tyme
 That euere he gadered so grete and gaf þerof so litel,
 Thouȝ he crye to crist þanne wiþ kene wil, I leue
 His ledene be in oure lordes ere lik a pies chiteryng; . . .
 By þe po feet is vnderstande, as I haue lerned in Auynet,
 Executours, false frendes, þat fulfille noȝt his wille
 That was writen, and þei witnesse to werche right as it wolde.
 Thus the Poete preueþ þe pecok for his feþeres;
 So is þe riche reuerenced by reson of hise goodes. (12.247-63)

Imaginative, with the aid of the *clergie* gained from sources such as Avianus, transforms his sensory vision into a moral tale, demonstrating through his proper reading the shortcomings inherent to an understanding produced by *kynde wit* alone.

Imaginative’s argument is therefore instructive for how we read and understand a lyrical dream vision such as Will’s. As Will experiences

¹⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 257.

his visions, he records them, writing what is allegedly the process of the poem's own making. But Will's *kynde wit* alone cannot lead *Piers Plowman's* public to any greater understanding. Instead, the vision must be seeded throughout with *clergie*, with quotations from psalms, authoritative voices (including Clergy himself), and biblical passages that gloss Will's personal vision and subjective experiences.

Imaginative's subordination of *kynde wit* to *clergie*, however, is no sooner explicated than it is challenged in the following passus by another of the poem's authority figures, Conscience, forcing us to reassess once more the poem's standpoint on unmediated sensory experiences. The investigation of the particulars of Conscience's argument that follows will lead us into a consideration of Middle English penitential lyric, with which it is intimately related. Both Imaginative's and Conscience's differing stances on the importance of *kynde wit* are crucial to *Piers Plowman's* engagement with the lyric, and important to our reading of the poem's Prologue, to which we shall return at the end of the chapter.

At the commencement of Will's fourth dream vision in Passus 13, Conscience invites Will to dine with him and his two other guests: Clergy, the allegorical embodiment of scriptural learning, and a friar. Conscience seats Will at a side board with a newcomer, Patience the pilgrim, while the remainder dine at the high table. Will soon discovers that not only are he and Patience afforded less prominent seating than the rest of the guests, but their food and drink are different as well. Scripture serves those at Conscience's table with

“sondry metes manye,” drawn from the gospels and the writings of the church fathers: “Scripture. . . serued hem. . . of Austyn, of Ambrose, of alle þe foure Euangelistes” (13.38-9). The friar refuses this traditional assortment in favor of richer foods: delicacies (in keeping with the poem’s continuous criticisms of corrupt friars) dishonestly won and disconnected from *clergie*: “mortrews [*stews*] and potages [*soups*]. / Of þat men myswonne þei made hem wel at ese” (13.41-2).

Patience and Will’s meal consists of simpler and more introspective fare, loaves and dishes of contrition and penance:

Conscience curteisly þo commaunded Scripture
 Bifore Pacience breed to brynge, bitynge apart,
 And me þat was his mette oþer mete boþe.
 He sette a sour loof toforn vs and seide, “*Agite penitenciam*”,¹⁷²
 And sipþe he drouz vs drynke, “*Diu perseuerans*”,¹⁷³
 “As long,” quod he, “as lif and lycame may dure.” . . .
 And he brouzt vs of *Beati quorum* of *Beatus virres* makyng,¹⁷⁴
 And þanne a mees of ooper mete of *Miserere mei deus*,¹⁷⁵
*Et quorum tecta sunt peccata*¹⁷⁶
 In a dissh of derne shrifte, *Dixi* and *confitebor tibi*.¹⁷⁷
 “Bryng pacience som pitaunce pryueliche”, quod Conscience,
 And þane hadde Pacience a pitaunce, *Pro hac orabit ad te*
omnis sanctus in tempore oportuno;¹⁷⁸
 And Conscience conforted vs and carped vs murye tales:
Cor contritum et humiliatum deus non despiciet.¹⁷⁹ (13.46-57)

¹⁷² “Do penance” (Mt 3:2)

¹⁷³ “Persevering for a long time”

¹⁷⁴ The Latin is a reference to the first two verses of Psalm 31, which in the Douay-Rheims Bible is “Blessed are they whose [*beati quorum*] iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man [*beati vir*] to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin, and in whose spirit there is no guile.” (Subsequent full-verse citations are taken from the Douay Bible.)

¹⁷⁵ “Have mercy on me, O God” – the beginning to Psalm 50 (see the discussion below).

¹⁷⁶ “and whose sins are covered” – another reference to Psalm 31 (see note 44 above).

¹⁷⁷ A reference to verse 5 of Psalm 31: “I said [*dixi*] I will confess [*confitebor*] against myself my injustice to the Lord”

¹⁷⁸ Ps 31:6: “For this shall every one that is holy pray to thee in a seasonable time.”

¹⁷⁹ Ps 50:19: “A contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

Like those others at the high board (with the notable exception of the friar), Patience and Will ingest scripture. But instead of consuming with Conscience and Clergy the solid staples of the gospels and the Church doctors, Will and his companion feed upon psalms; more specifically, Scripture serves them extracts from both psalms 31 and 50, two of the seven penitential psalms attributed to David.¹⁸⁰

Although these seven psalms were believed to express David's remorsefulness for his sins, there is nevertheless a sense here in which these psalms are brought before Will and Patience not as historical texts or witnesses to sacred history, but rather as texts for personal, introspective meditation and rumination.¹⁸¹ Conscience's accompanying injunctions to do penance and persevere (*diu perseverans*) as long as their lives endure certainly suggest that his guests accept and ingest their textual meal in a tropological fashion. David's psalms thus become instructive and moral; by applying David's situation to their own, by internalizing his contrition, both Will and Patience are inspired to emulate his example, to occupy his speaking position in his psalms (*Miserere mei* – "Have mercy on *me*" they say in David's words) and identify in David's contrition their own personal expressions of remorse.

¹⁸⁰ The seven penitential psalms are 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, 142 (according to the medieval numbering). See Gillespie 2005, 80-3.

¹⁸¹ For more on digestion/rumination as a metaphor for reading, see Carruthers 1990, 164ff. For a close study of the relationship between food and speech, see Mann 1979. Carruthers illustrates the image of rumination by quoting Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicaon*, v, 5, where he describes walking through the forest ("silva") of Scripture, "cuius sententias quasi fructus quosdam dulcissimos legendo carpinus, tractando ruminamus" ("whose ideas like so many sweetest fruits, we pick as we read and chew as we consider them") (164-5; 327, n. 33).

We know from medieval religious treatises that sacred texts such as these were intended for the sort of tropological consumption enacted in this passus. For instance, Hugh of St. Victor's *De arca Noe morali* describes three levels (allegorized as storeys within the *arca sapientiae*, or "ark of wisdom") of moralized judgment: *rectus*, *utilis*, and *necessarius* (correct, useful, and habitual).¹⁸² Each level represents a deeper engagement with scripture, progressing from a basic love of scriptural meditation (*meditatio*) in the first storey to the full domestication of scripture in the third, at which point the knowledge internalized from the textual tradition shapes the individual's thoughts and actions:

Restat tertium, ut cum cepero habere opera uirtutum elaborem quoque ipsas uirtutes habere, hoc est ut quod foris demonstro in opere intus possideam in uirtute. . . . Si ergo ad hoc cogitationem cordis mei instituo, ut quicquid boni in me foris humanis apparet aspectibus diuinis intus satagam presentare obtutibus, tunc ascendi in tertiam mansionem, ubi uirtutes sunt que sunt necessarie. (2.5)¹⁸³

[There remains the third kind of thought, that when I have begun to do the works of the virtues, I should labour to have the virtues themselves—that is to say, that I should possess within myself the virtue which I show in outward works. If, then, I direct the thought of my heart to this end, that I may strive to show inwardly before the eyes of God whatever good appears in me outwardly to human sight, then I have gone up into the third storey, where the essential virtues are to be found.]¹⁸⁴

In this passage, Hugh promotes textual study and knowledge (or *clergie* to adopt *Piers Plowman*'s idiom) as a means of refining both the

¹⁸² My source for this discussion of Hugh of St. Victor is Carruthers 1990, who paraphrases and discusses *De arca Noe morali* on 162-3.

¹⁸³ Hugh of St. Victor 2001, 41.

¹⁸⁴ Hugh of St. Victor 1962, 81-2.

inner and the outer man: how we appear first to others and then to God (*aspectibus diuinis intus. . . presentare obtutibus*). This refinement is achieved primarily via *meditatio*, or textual meditation and memorization: “What Hugh describes here is a process of completely internalizing what one has read. . . and the agency by which this is accomplished is *meditation*, the process of memory-training, storage, and retrieval.”¹⁸⁵ And one common medieval metaphor for this process of textual internalization is rumination, or digestion. As an example of this metaphor, Mary Carruthers, in *The Book of Memory*, cites the following passage from the *Regula monachorum*:

Quomodo ergo iuxta qualitatem ciborum de stomacho ructus erumpit, et vel boni, vel mali odoris flatus indicium est, ita interioris hominis cogitationes verba proferunt, et *ex abundantia cordis os loquitur*. Justus comedens replet animam suam. Cumque sacris doctrinis fuerit satiatus, de boni cordis thesauro profert ea quae bona sunt.

[Wherefore, as a belch bursts forth from the stomach according to the quality of the food, and the significance [to the health] of a *flatus* is according either to the sweetness or stench of its odor, so the cogitations of the inner man bring forth words, and *from the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks* (Lk. 6:45). The just man, eating, fills his soul. And when he is replete with sacred doctrine, from the good treasury of his memory he brings forth those things which are good.]¹⁸⁶

By consuming texts, Patience and Will engage in a tropological interpretation of scripture: textual consumption generates cogitations that in turn produce in them words and actions with moral force. This graphic depiction of textual regurgitation is perhaps better modeled by

¹⁸⁵ Carruthers 1990, 163.

¹⁸⁶ Both Latin text and translation are from Carruthers 1990, 328 n. 39, 166. The Latin passage is from the *Regula monachorum*, cap. 14 (*Patrologia Latina* 30, 365B).

the friar's fit of indigestion. After the friar has had his fill, Patience correctly predicts that

“He shal haue a penaunce in his paunche and puffe at ech a
 worde,
And þanne shullen hise guttes goþele and he shal galpen after.
For now he haþ dronken so depe he wole deuyne soone
And preuen it by hir Pocalips and passion of Seint Auereys
That neiþer bacon ne braun, blancmanger ne mortrews,
Is neiþer fish ne flessch, but fode for a penaunt.” (13.88-93)

The friar can muster only a weak defense for what he has ingested in lieu of sacred doctrine; he has filled his purse—and not his soul—through eating ill-gotten gains. His embodiment of poor *meditatio* demonstrates that the internalization of sacred doctrine is not simply an exercise in memorization; rather, it is an ethical program of personal and spiritual betterment. The good man, replete with sacred doctrine (*cumque sacris doctrinis fuerit satiat*) brings forth those things that are good (*profert ea quae bona sunt*), unlike the friar, whose dubious sources create only a *penaunce*, or suffering.

Despite his moral failings, however, the friar's advice about the Do-triad at dinner is not unreasonable. His words, in fact, are in keeping with Hugh of St. Victor's highest, *necessarius* level of moral judgment, which demands that we refine ourselves and our actions according to the sacred doctrine that we internalize. This alignment of word and deed would seem to be the very definition of Dobest that the friar offers (and fails to embody) at Conscience's banquet:

“Dowel,” quod þis doctour, “do as clerkes techen.
That trauailleth to teche opere I holde it for a dobet.

And dobest doþ hymself so as he seiþ and prechep:
*Qui facit et docuerit magnus vocabitur in regno celorum.*¹⁸⁷
(13.116-8a)

This answer, however, would appear to be unsatisfactory for Conscience, for after eliciting alternate descriptions of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest from Clergy and Patience, he decides to quit both friends and banquet and follow Patience the pilgrim on foot.

Conscience's preference of Patience's company is crucial to our understanding of the allegory of textuality presented in this passus' metaphors of consumption. Whereas Imaginative had stressed the importance of tempering all *kynde* knowledge with *clergie*, Conscience favors experiential knowledge over the study of scripture, confessing to Clergy that he would rather "haue pacience parfitliche þan half þi pak of bokes" (13.201). As Traugott Lawler has argued, Conscience's choice is motivated not by a desire for textual knowledge, but rather for that knowledge which is gleaned from the senses; his decision is "a decisive move from books to life, or from what Chaucer calls 'auctoritee' to experience, or, in the terms Imaginative has used in Passus 12, from 'clergy' to 'kind wit': from being in many places you learn what clerks in their libraries don't know."¹⁸⁸ In other words, Patience represents for Conscience a viable alternative to Clergy's textual knowledge; he "haþ be in many place, and paraunter knoweþ / That no clerk ne kan. . ." (13.134-5). His source of knowledge is not from books, but from what he has seen in many places: from *kynde*

¹⁸⁷ Mt 5:19 (Douay-Rheims): "But he that shall do and teach, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

¹⁸⁸ Lawler 1995, 91-2.

wit or “all kynnes sightes,” as Imaginative would say—from lived experience or the realm, as we have previously seen, of lyric.

This sensory experience that Patience represents, however, is not entirely divorced from the scriptural learning that Conscience dismisses. As much as Conscience’s decision to follow him places Patience in opposition to Clergy and his books, Patience’s intellectual foundations are also textual ones. He feeds, as we have seen, on the psalms, texts which in turn motivate his actions and bring forth good things. Patience’s experiential alternative to Clergy’s bookishness is thus not wholly sensory, for it contains a measure of textuality. It is, in other words, lyrical, having claims to both established literary traditions and personal experiences: it is a mediated discourse masquerading as an unmediated one. For unlike the gospels and commentaries served to Clergy and Conscience, the penitential psalms are a species of lyric. Although tied to specific events within the larger framing narrative of David’s biography, the two psalms that Patience consumes are static and subjective, focusing not on particular events or narratives but rather on emotions. They employ the discursive I-you axis common to solo lyric forms, and it is precisely this pronominal structure, as discussed in previous chapters, that allows the auditor or meditator to identify with the role of the lyric’s speaker: to identify with the speaker’s experiences in much the same way that Conscience wishes to share in Patience’s experiencing of the world.

We can identify the mechanisms by which this identification was normally achieved in late medieval penitential lyrics—a poetic tradition

which *Piers Plowman* invokes repeatedly in this passus. The penitential psalms in particular served as the basis for a substantial body of Middle English lyrics of contrition and confession.¹⁸⁹ One of the most popular adaptations was composed by the Carmelite friar Richard Maidstone in the late fourteenth century. Appearing in whole or in part in twenty-seven extant manuscripts, Maidstone's poem expands the seven penitential psalms into over 500 lines of Middle English verse. The poem commences with a stanza that introduces the translation as a personal exercise in contrition:

To Goddes worshepe þat dere vs bouzte,
 To whom we owen to make our moon
 Of oure synnes þat we haue wrouzte
 In souþe and elde, wel many oon;
 Þe seuen salmes are þourze souzte [*thoroughly sought after*]
 In shame of alle oure goostly foon, [*spiritual foes/enemies*]
 And in Englisshe þei ben brouzte
 For synne in man to be fordon. [*overcome*] (1-8) ¹⁹⁰

No mention is made here of David or the biographical details that supposedly foreground his composition of the psalms. Instead, Maidstone's text removes the psalms from the context of sacred history altogether and places the focus squarely on the spiritual condition of the individual penitents. These psalms are *þourze souzte* by them as a way of defending them from their *goostly foon* and not as a means of recounting the events of David's life. Like the lyrics of Troilus and Antigone, these short poems must first begin as universal

¹⁸⁹ Kuczynski 1995 is the most substantial study to date on medieval English adaptations of penitential psalms. His fourth chapter focuses exclusively on Middle English versions of the psalms. Some of the following discussion is drawn from his second chapter on the imitation of David as a model of compunction.

¹⁹⁰ All quotations from Maidstone are from Maidstone 1990.

expressions—they must be stripped of peculiars in order to be applied back to the individual.

The personal, affective nature of Maidstone's adaptation can be demonstrated by an excerpt from his rendition of psalm 50, or the *Miserere*—one of the texts consumed by Patience and Will at Conscience's banquet:

*Docebo iniquos uias tuas & impij ad te conuertentur*¹⁹¹
Be wickede I shal þi weyes teche,
Be synful shul to þe conuerte;
Pou synful soule bewar of wreche, [*retribution*]
And þenke on Cristes heed & herte,
Breste & backe and body bleche, [*bruised*]
How hit was beten wiþ scourges smerte.
To rewe on him I wolde reche; [*succeed*]
Alas! Þer may no teere outsterte. [*burst forth*] (13.489-96)

Maidstone, here as elsewhere in his poem, expands the original psalm's verse into an eight-line stanza. Only the stanza's first two lines translate the Latin verse into the vernacular. The remaining six lines depart from the psalm's theme of converting others in order to study instead the individual soul and the sins that inhibit compunction. The stanza's focus thus moves progressively inward, from instructing others to perfecting the self through meditation on the suffering Christ, a typical image for medieval lyric reflection (as witnessed by the numerous lyric variations on the *Candet nudatum pectus* commonplace¹⁹²). But instead of inducing feelings of pathos,

¹⁹¹ Ps 50:15: "I will teach the unjust thy ways and the wicked shall be converted to thee."

¹⁹² "His bare breast shines." See Woolf 1968, 28-30.

the figure of Christ musters no contrition in the lyric speaker, who in a sense fails to succumb to the lyric's affectivity.

Nonetheless, Maidstone's interpolation of the psalm's verse, his use of pronominal form and apostrophe, and his emotional meditation upon a visual stimulus emphasize and deepen the psalm's lyric qualities. In this sense, Maidstone's verse is in fact a lyric reflection upon a lyric, refashioning David's verse into a work that invites even more self-reflection via the use of the exemplary first person pronoun to motivate feelings of personal contrition.

In regards to our analysis of *Piers Plowman's* lyricism, it is important to note that Maidstone's recognition of the permeability of psalm 50's lyric ego and its capacity to effect a universal identification with its audience was not without precedent. Both Langland and Maidstone, writing in the late fourteenth century, were contributing to a tradition of affective engagement with the penitential psalms. Some of the earliest instances in this tradition have been identified by Michael Kuczynski, who, in his discussion of the moral significance of the *Miserere* to readers, cites several late classical and medieval texts which attest to the psalm's affective properties. The first is Augustine's commentary on the *Miserere* in his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, which describes how the psalm's experiential pronouns encourage a reciprocation of the Psalmist's emotions:

Ad te Nathan propheta non est missus, ipse David ad te missus est. Audi eum clamantem, et simul clama; audi gementem, et congemisce; audi flentem, et lacrymas junge; audi correctum, et condelectare.

[To you Nathan the prophet is not sent, David himself is sent to you. Hear (David) crying and cry with him; hear him groaning, and groan with him; hear him weeping, and mingle your tears with his; hear him amended, and with him rejoice.]¹⁹³

Although Augustine's commentary encourages the emotional identification that we have identified as characteristic of the lyric, Kuczynski argues that the *Miserere* does not represent a universal experience, for it cannot be divorced from the particular details of David's life. The psalm's narrative context can never be wholly effaced, which impedes the meditator's complete identification with the speaking subject. The psalms

have moral force not because they have somehow detached themselves from David's history, been generalized to the point of interpretive vagueness, but because they actually summon up the shade of David, whom others then must confront. In this sense, according to the commentators, the Psalms must always be regarded as both individual and representative. When the Psalms are heard or read, we identify with David, who in these moments is powerfully present before us.¹⁹⁴

While it is true that Augustine does not divorce his commentary from the character of David (in fact, he foregrounds his exegesis with a brief recounting of David's adultery with Bersabee—the supposed impetus for the psalm's composition), it is nevertheless clear that we should see in the Psalmist some semblance of ourselves. David's moral situation is general enough to be applicable to that of the common Christian who sins knowingly:

¹⁹³ Both the Latin and English translation are from Kuczynski 1995, 55. See Kuczynski's second chapter for a longer discussion of the *Miserere*.

¹⁹⁴ Kuczynski 1995, 56.

Iste Dauid non posset dicere: *Ignorans feci*. Non enim ignorabat quantum mali esset contrectatio coniugis alienae, et quantum malum esset interfectio mariti nescientis, et nec saltem irascentis. Consequuntur ergo misericordiam Domini qui ignorantes fecerunt; et qui scientes, consequuntur non qualem libet misericordiam, sed magnam misericordiam.¹⁹⁵

[This David could not say, “Ignorant I did it.” For he was not ignorant how very evil a thing was the touching of another’s wife, and how very evil a thing was the killing of the husband, who knew not of it, and was not even angered. They obtain therefore the mercy of the Lord that have in ignorance done it; and they that have knowing done it, obtain not any mercy it may chance, but “great mercy.”]¹⁹⁶

We identify with David because his situation is representative of those who live in sin. In him is embodied all those who sin knowingly. We thus speak *with* David, and soon our voice overtakes his entirely:

Quid ergo? Quaeris misericordiam, peccatum impunitum remanebit? Responderit Dauid, responderint lapsi, responderint cum Dauid, ut misericordiam mereantur sicut Dauid, et dicant: Non, Domine, non erit impunitum peccatum meum; noui iustitiam eius, cuius quaero misericordiam; non impunitum erit, sed ideo nolo ut tu me punias, quia ago peccatum meum punio; ideo peto ut ignoscas, quia ego agnosco.¹⁹⁷

[What then? Thou askest mercy; shall sin unpunished abide? Let David answer, let those that have fallen answer, answer with David, and say, No, Lord, no sin of mine shall be unpunished; I know the justice of Him whose mercy I ask: it shall not be unpunished, but for this reason I will not that Thou punish me, because I punish my sin: for this reason I beg that Thou pardon, because I acknowledge.]¹⁹⁸

Augustine’s first person pronouns here become experiential: they are ours as much as they are David’s. David’s speech is substituted with

¹⁹⁵ Augustine 1956, 603.

¹⁹⁶ Augustine 1888, 191.

¹⁹⁷ Augustine 1956, 603.

¹⁹⁸ Augustine 1888, 191.

our own, and his distinctive voice is lost in the chorus of the Christian everyman. This reciprocation of and identification with the Psalmist's emotions that Augustine encourages, made possible by the psalm's lyric qualities, is the very same phenomenon that Maidstone exploits in his own adaptation. Maidstone, however, represents an even further remove in which the figure of David is never explicitly mentioned, for the moral significance of the psalms, like that of most lyric poetry, is augmented by their exemplary nature, by their references to the interior life and universal experience. These are texts that, ultimately, we make our own.

Kuczynski cites a second passage that also detaches the *Miserere* from the character of David, emphasizing the psalm's relevance to the individual penitent. The passage is an extract from the Quinquagesima Sunday sermon (i.e. the Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday and Lent) of John Mirk's late fourteenth-century sermon cycle, the *Festial*. In it, Mirk stresses the importance of "rehearsing" the psalm as a process of personal contrition and atonement:

Wherfor to draw men to contricion namely these fyfty dayes, þe fyft psalm of þe sauter, þat ys: "Miserere mei, Deus!" ys more rehersyd þes dayes þen any oþer tyme of þe 3ere. Þe wheche ys þus to say yn Englysche: "God, aftyr þy gret mercy haue mercy on me; and aftyr þy multytude of þy mercyus do away my wickednesse!" and soo forth. Thus when a man is sory of hys synnys and sayth þes wordys wyth a full hert, God heryth his prayer and for3euuyth hym hys trespas, so þat he be yn full wyll to amende hym yn tyme comyng, and also full of charyte wythout faynyng.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ Mirk 1905, 76. This passage and the following quotation are taken from Kuczynski 1995, 57.

Kuczynski argues that Mirk's "primary concern in this passage. . . is with the sincerity of an individual's identification with the Psalmist's words. . . . David's words actually become '*his* prayer'. . . for the original sentiments behind the words match his own sorrowful feelings."²⁰⁰ The text of the sermon, however, never situates the psalm within the context of David's biography or identifies "the original sentiments" that inform it, as does Augustine's commentary. Nowhere does the sermon even mention the name "David," although medieval Christians were likely familiar with the story of the psalm's genesis. It is the psalm's ability to model the discourse of the penitent Christian everyman that Mirk exploits in his sermon.

The properties of Mirk's other textual *ensampulls* in the Quinquagesima Sunday sermon provide an illustrative contrast to the experiential nature of the lyric *Miserere*. The example that precedes his discussion of the psalm is a short, third-person narrative of a sinful man who, by means of his sincere repentance on his deathbed, secures a release from the pains of purgatory. After relating the tale of this man's miraculous escape from punishment, Mirk then emphasizes the tale's moral relevance to his audience: "Þus þe gret contrycyon þat þys man hadde, er he deyde, quenched þe gret payne þat was ordeynt to hym. Hereby 3e may know opynly how spedfull [*beneficial*] hyt ys to a man to be contrite of his synnys."²⁰¹ From this example, Mirk insists, we can extract a truth that is relevant and applicable to all human experience: we can see how beneficial

²⁰⁰ Kuczynski 1995, 57.

²⁰¹ Mirk 1905, 75-6.

contrition is to every person. The contrite man in the story provides an example for our emulation. But we do not fully identify with this man; we do not speak with his voice and assume his role in the narrative, for the *ensampull*'s specific details and third-person pronouns create a distance between ourselves and the text's narrative. By contrast, the *Miserere*'s effect on the individual is much more direct and compelling, and Mirk need not describe its relevance to the individual penitent. The psalm draws "men to contricion" via their identification with its content and speaker. When they, "sory of. . . synnys" say "þes wordys wyth a full hert," God hears the psalm as their own prayer, for they have substituted themselves for the lyric ego.

Another fourteenth-century example is the English mystic Richard Rolle, who was aware of the affective power of the lyric and used short experiential verses to promote greater religious devotion in his audience. In his letter *Ego Dormio*, which he addresses to one in whom he sees "mare godenes. . . þan in another"²⁰² he condenses his prose commentary into three lyric poems, one for each of his three degrees of spiritual love. The lyrics not only encapsulate the devout attitude endemic to each of the three degrees, but they also provide the vehicles whereby each degree is attained. They are texts to be consumed in the hopes that they bring forth good things in the lives of their consumers. Rolle introduces his second lyric with instructions for its use, framing the lyric with exhortations to devout behavior, much as Conscience does when he feeds Patience and Will at his

²⁰² Rolle 1963, 62.

banquet: “I wil þat þow never be ydel, bot ay owther speke of God, or wirke som notabil warke, or thynk on hym principaly, þat þi thought be ay havand hym in mynde. And thynk oft on his passyon.”²⁰³ The lyric itself uses the familiar pronominal form to full moral effect, creating a discursive scene between Rolle’s reader-meditator and the divine:

Jhesu, receyve my hert, and to þi lufe me bryng;
 Al my desyre þou ert, I covete þi comyng.
 Þow make me clene of synne, and lat us never twyn.
 Kyndel me fire within, þat I þi lufe may wyn,
 And se þi face, Jhesu, in joy þat never sal blyn.²⁰⁴

Rolle afterwards promises that, by reciting this text regularly, we will achieve in ourselves a greater spiritual understanding:

If þou wil thynk þis ilk day [*each day*], þou sal fynde swetnes þat sal draw þi hert up, þat sal gar þe fal [*make you fall down*] in gretynge [*weeping*] and in grete langyng til Jhesu, and þi thoght sal al be on Jhesu, and so be receyved aboven all erthly thyng, aboven þe firmament and þe sternes [*sky and stars*], so þat þe egh [*eye*] of þi hert mai loke intil heven. And þan enters þow into þe thirde degre of lufe, in þe whilk þou sal have grete delyte and comforth, if þow may get grace to com þartill.²⁰⁵

The lyric therefore, by means of our identification with its speaking subject, generates in us the very feelings of love and devotion that it describes. Through regular recitation, Rolle assures us, our internalization of the lyric will be so complete that will even our bodies

²⁰³ Ibid., 67.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 68.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 69.

will respond to the intensity of the lyric's "love-longing," resulting in swooning and weeping.

We can now return at last to the banquet scene of Passus 13, where Conscience's choice to quit Clergy indicates that he sees something of use in this experiential mode of learning embodied by Patience. Unlike Imaginative's ideal clerks, Conscience does not wish to obtain knowledge "first thorough bokes," but rather through sensory experience that the pronominal form of lyric poetry provides (12.100). He consequently refuses Clergy's final offer to browse through a bible and explicate for him the "leeste point. . . that Pacience the pilgrym parfitly knew never" (13.187-8). But before he departs, Conscience effects a reconciliation with Clergy, who promises to "dwelle as I do, me devoir to shewe. . . til Pacience have preved thee and parfit thee maked" (13.213-5). Conscience will return to Clergy once he has been proven and perfected by lyric and sensory experience. For as we learn from the Apostle Paul, it is only the perfected man—one who has fully exercised his *senses* (those *qui. . . exercitatos habent sensus*)—who can be weaned from the milk of the words of God (*sermonum Dei*) and consume instead the solid food of scripture: "But solid food is for the perfect; for those who through practice have the senses exercised in order to discern good and evil" ("Perfectorum autem est solidus cibus: eorum, qui pro consuetudine exercitatos habent sensus ad discretionem boni ac mali") (Heb. 5:14).

The solution to the apparent incongruity between Conscience's dinner and Will's conversation with Imaginative is the same as that

which accounts for the movement in the Prologue: the distinction between mediated and unmediated literature. For Conscience, experience is necessary, but it also needs to be textually mediated and motivated by scriptural traditions, producing an informed but generalized experiential discourse. In this sense Conscience's ideal approaches the medieval lyric, which, steeped in literary traditions, becomes experiential when it is re-enacted or, in the case of Conscience, consumed. Likewise, Imaginative does not disdain *kynde wit*, but rather demonstrates its didactic potential when coupled with textual authorities. Something similar can be said of the Prologue, which pretends to be unmediated but really is otherwise. Descent into street cries, however, seemingly quits the high literary realm and actually makes good on the initial assumption that this discourse is in fact mimetic of lived experience.

We are now in a position to reconsider the passage with which this chapter began. *Piers Plowman's* Prologue commences with a traditional May introduction that fixes the poem's semantic axis in the formalized registers of medieval romance. But as we have seen, the Prologue subsequently moves through a field full of folk to a crowded city street, abandoning the traditional trappings of popular romance almost as quickly as it invoked them. Paul Zumthor's commentary on medieval textual traditions, once more, will be of some service to us here:

Medieval poetry not only escapes experiential determinism but substitutes for it its own mode of being, in which facts take on an aura of secondary values, confirmed and evaluated (so to

speak) in the registers of a homogeneous tradition. The poem takes its savor from that very tradition, leading poet and public alike into a world of convention and giving them an existence in it by the peculiar form of understanding it awakens. The medieval poem is not made up, as is normally the case for modern poems, of a succession of images evoked from line to line, but proceeds from a unique and definitive transfer, which, from its first measures, projects the whole discourse onto the imaginary plane fixed by tradition.²⁰⁶

Yet there is no singular plane of tradition that can account for the Prologue's unique succession of images. By the end of the Prologue, the poem does not proceed further into the world of romantic convention with which it opened; instead, it progresses into a reflection of the real world—not an imaginary plane established by other literary models, but rather a bustling scene of commerce likely familiar to any medieval English city-dweller. The poem is therefore, at the close of the Prologue, projected onto the plane of real, lived experience—of *kynde* experience—and this image of the real world becomes the source and focus of the poem's subsequent visions: "Al this I seigh slepyng," Will informs us, "and sevene sythes more" (Prol.231). Will's experience of all that he sees sleeping is sensory, impressed first upon his senses: the realm of *kynde wit*, or lyric. As such, the final, urban moments of the Prologue would seem to make good on the *Natureingang*'s conventional posturing as an unmediated experience: the poem has indeed broken from literary tradition and relays what is seemingly the raw data absorbed by Will's senses within a crowded marketplace. Yet the entire vision that Will promises to *avowe amonges men* is in fact a literary fiction composed by Langland,

²⁰⁶ Zumthor 1992, 85.

the author, and not the truthful, individual testimony that it claims to be. The field full of folk that Will envisions is thus as much a realm for poetry as it is fashioned of it, and in this mixture of literary traditions and lived experience, *Piers Plowman* reveals itself as inherently lyrical. The Prologue's abrupt movement reveals that its main subject of scrutiny is both literature and lived experience. The real world thus becomes both the source of the poem and the environment in which it must find its rightful place.

Chapter Four

Lyric Re-Performance

The previous chapter's discussion of sensory (*kynde wit*) and intellectual (*clergie*) experience and the experiential potential of the lyric pronominal form provides us with a foundation for the examination of *Piers Plowman's* concluding visions. In the final passūs, Will finds himself in the midst of sacred history, which unfolds around him in a series of events drawn loosely from scripture. To complement Will's experience of the major events in Christ's life, Langland draws upon various liturgical sources and hymns: writings designed to make sacred history current, to bring its events forward into a timeless present that is reminiscent of lyric time—a time, to recall Culler, that is “a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say ‘now.’”²⁰⁷ It is in this special temporality that moral action is born, when literary experiences become assimilated with our own via a process of re-performance.

At the commencement of Passus 16, Will has a vision in which he sees the Tree of Charity flourishing under the watchful eye of Piers the Plowman. The tree, laden with sacred fruit and harried by the Devil, recalls that other iconic tree in the book of Genesis from which Adam and Eve fatefully plucked the fruit of knowledge. The tree's iconography is likely informed by the allegorical garden of virtue that appears in such works as the *Somme le roi*, a moral treatise composed

²⁰⁷ Culler 1981, 148-9.

in 1279 by the Dominican Lorens d'Orléans.²⁰⁸ In the *Somme le roi* and its later English translations,²⁰⁹ “the good man is likened to a beautiful garden, full of green and fair trees, while God the Father is the gardener, Christ is the sun, and the Holy Ghost is an assistant gardener who goes about grafting virtues.”²¹⁰ Will’s vision, however, demotes the Trinity from active agents to passive wooden piles that can be wielded to good effect by Piers Plowman and Liberum Arbitrium (i.e. “Free Will”). In this scenario, Piers Plowman becomes the chief cultivator of the virtues, which are limited to the three grades of chastity.²¹¹ Piers explains to Will the spiritual significance of the tree’s three different varieties of fruit: matrimony depends from the lowest boughs, while continence is grafted to the middle and maidenhood springs from the very top. The tree is one of the more evidently allegorical objects to be found in *Piers Plowman*, for even Will seems to be aware that it possesses a dual nature. He understands that what he sees growing before him is actually less important than what it represents. He thus continually inquires of Piers for further explication, and the latter’s responses acknowledge the tree’s function as a symbol:

“I shal tell þee as tid [*at once*] what þis tree highte.
The ground þere it groweþ, goodnesse it hatte;

²⁰⁸ Kosmer 1978, 302.

²⁰⁹ See, for instance, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, edited by Francis 1942.

²¹⁰ Kosmer 1978, 303.

²¹¹ See Bloomfield 1958 for a more detailed discussion of the history of the three grades of chastity in medieval literature. The Middle English *Book of Vices and Virtues* lists seven states of chastity: (1) undedicated virginity; (2) repentant unchastity; (3) marriage; (4) widowhood; (5) dedicated virginity; (6) the chastity of clerks in orders; (7) the chastity of the religious (i.e. those in religious orders). (Ed. Francis 1942, 243-72.)

And I haue told pee what histe þe tree: þe Trinite it menep”
(16.61-3)

Piers’ comments couple the visible parts of the tree with labels describing their spiritual significance. For Piers, the object’s name is indistinguishable from how it “meneth”: he names (ME *hōten*) the tree’s features as one would gloss a text.

This coupling of sign and signified, of object and its meaning, continues in Piers’ description of the three fruits of charity:

“Heer now byneþe,” quod he þo, “if I nede hadde,
Matrimoyne I may nyme, a moiste fruyt wiþalle.
Thanne Contynence is neer þe crop as kaylewey bastard.
Thanne bereþ þe crop kynde fruyt and clenest of alle,
Maidenhode, Aungeles peeris, and erst wole be ripe
And swete wiþouten swellyng; sour worþ it neuere.” (16.67-72)

These three states of sinless living that Piers describes retain some of their accidents as fruit: matrimony is “moiste,” virginity ripens quickly and is never sour. Their physical qualities are those of taste, but their actual significance is far beyond the sensory realm. Langland takes advantage of this gustatory imagery to pun between the concepts of tasting and knowing. Will, as were Adam and Eve in their garden, is curious to taste the tree’s fruit:

I preide Piers to pulle adoun an Appul and he wolde,
And suffre me to assaien what sauour it hadde. (16.73-4)

The word “savour” is related to the Latin verb *sapere*, which, as Jill Mann reminds us, “means first ‘to taste’ and. . . secondly ‘to know’.”²¹²

²¹² Mann 1979, 41.

In her reading of this passage, Mann invokes Anima's earlier discussion of Adam and Eve in Passus 15:

“Coveitise to konne and to knowe science
Adam and Eve putte out of Paradis:
*Sciencie appetitus hominem immortalitatis gloriam spoliavit*²¹³
And rizt as hony is yuel to defie and englymeþ þe mawe,
Right so þat þoru reson wolde þe roote knowe
Of god and of hise grete myztes, hise graces it letteþ.
For in þe likynge liþ a pride and a licames coueitise
Ayen cristes counseil and alle clerkes techyne,
That is *Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere*.”²¹⁴ (15.62-9)

“The desire to know,” argues Mann, “is thus a ‘lycames coueitise’—a bodily desire. Thus when the dreamer expresses a desire to eat an apple from the Tree of Charity to see ‘what sauoure it hadde’. . . there is, I think, nothing in this desire which is sinful or absurd. The only way you can know apples, for Langland, is to eat them.”²¹⁵ The act of eating provides Will with an alternative method of learning what the fruit “meneth,” a method perhaps more effective than Piers’ learned commentary, which fails to satiate Will’s “lycames coueitise.” Like Conscience at dinner, Will cannot not be told the truth, but must experience it for himself. He seeks to supplement the *clergie* inherent in Piers’ glossing, which is only partially successful in producing the answers that he seeks (e.g. “And egreliche [*sharply*] he lokod on me and þerfore I spared / To asken hym any moore þerof. . .” [16.64-5]), with the experiential *kynde wit* of tasting the fruit itself. These fruits

²¹³ “The desire for knowledge deprived humanity of the glory of immortality”

²¹⁴ “Not to be more wise than it is proper to be wise” (Rom. 12:3)

²¹⁵ Mann 1979: 41.

represent something other than their physical selves, and in desiring to know their “savour,” Will seeks to understand what they signify.

If we, as Mann suggests, thus align the two potential meanings of “savour,” then Will’s desire to taste the fruit clearly reflects a “coveitise to konne,” although the knowledge that he seeks is not, as was the case with his biblical forebears, “þe roote. . . of God and of hise grete myztes.” The fruit of charity does not promise such revelations. But as this desire to savor and to know is the very sin committed by Adam and Eve, Will’s request to taste the fruit of the tree cannot help but recall their transgression. In fact, it does more than merely recall it: in giving voice to this desire Will *re-performs* the Fall, as Piers Plowman’s attempt to retrieve the fruit for Will results in its capture by the Devil, who absconds with it to hell. As M. F. Vaughan argues, Will “is here participating in a re-enactment of Adam’s sin, a re-enactment which precipitates the historical consequences of that sin: consigning to hell the souls of the just who died before the Redemption. . . . Here, in the inner dream, the Dreamer becomes to a significant degree Adam, becomes an embodiment of fallen human kind. . . . It is the operation of *his* desire, of *his* will, which is formally responsible for this poetic re-enactment of the Fall. . . .”²¹⁶ Will, in other words, occupies Adam’s place. Adam’s desire becomes his own through a process of textual re-experiencing similar to that which occurs in lyric poetry.

First-hand, intimate accounts and re-performances of the major events of sacred history are hallmarks of medieval Latin and English lyric poetry. Lyrics furnished the material for devout meditators who

²¹⁶ Vaughan 1980, 95, 97.

envisioned themselves as present at significant historical scenes, such as Christ's Nativity and Crucifixion. In such popular Latin lyric commonplaces as *Candet nudatum pectus* ("his bare breast shines") and *Respice in faciem Christi tui* ("gaze upon the face of your Christ"), which provide the basis for numerous extant poems, the lyric speaker finds himself standing at the foot of the cross at Calvary, gazing upon the crucified Christ and moved by the spectacle to thoughts of devotion and empathy (and as we shall soon see, it is Christ's adopted humanity that makes this empathy possible). This process of historical envisioning, Rosemary Woolf explains,

was the basic exercise in simple Cistercian meditation, which had begun with Aelred [of Rievaulx]'s *Letter to his Sister*: in this he directs her to imagine herself present in all the great episodes of Christ's life, and at the Crucifixion she is told to stand, not with the women, "quae longe stant", but "cum matre virgine et discipulo virgine accede ad crucem, et perfusum pallore vultum cominus intuere" [". . . with the virgin mother and the virgin disciple go to the Cross and, together with them, gaze on His face suffused with pallor"]. This exercise recurs over and over again in Latin meditative prose and verse of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²¹⁷

It might be useful to recall here the Wordsworthian poetic ideal, since Aelred's prescriptions provide an excellent example of how different medieval lyric aesthetics are from modern.²¹⁸ Both Aelred and Wordsworth propose a process of intellection or envisioning that must precede an emotional re-experiencing. For Wordsworth, the poet re-experiences his or her own feelings through the lyric; for Aelred, the

²¹⁷ Woolf 1968, 29-30. The English translation is Woolf's. For more on the commonplaces mentioned here, see Woolf 28ff.

²¹⁸ See Chapter One.

poet describes experiences that are not personal but rather native to a shared textual tradition (what Mary Carruthers would refer to as “common memory”), namely biblical scripture. In fact, for Aelred a meditative poem should not recollect in tranquility the poet’s original emotion; rather, he encourages his sister to experience something for the *first* time, to allow the spectacle she envisions to move her as it never has before, to create for her new emotions. This personal experience of a literary-historical event is thus the end of meditative poetry for Aelred. Composition enables this emotional process; it does not follow from it.

The personal meditation that Aelred encourages thus finds an ideal vehicle in the medieval lyric on account of its ability to create for its audience an experiential, static situation. The lyric’s pronominal form renders the devout meditation especially portable, as any meditator can easily identify with the permeable “I” of the lyric poem and internalize the lyric speaker’s emotional reaction to the witnessed event. A particularly fine example of such a lyric meditation can be found among the Harley 2253 lyrics:

When y miselue stonde
 ant wiþ myn ezen seo
 þurled [*pierced*] fot ant honde
 wiþ grete nayles þreo—
 on him nes nout bileued [*nothing was believed about him*]
 þat wes of peynes freo [*noble*]—
 wel wel ohte myn herte
 for his loue to smerte [*ache*]
 ant sike ant sory beo [*and sigh and be sorry*]²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Brook 1948, 54.

This stanza supplies the requisite sensory material for devout meditation in its description of Christ's noble endurance of his Passion. True to Aelred's provisions, the lyric emphasizes the first-hand nature of the vision by reiterating the speaker's physical and sensory participation in the dramatic scene. *I myself* stand here and *with my eyes* see the suffering before me: an imagined experience which in turn generates a natural and appropriate emotional reaction (one unmediated by Wordsworth's process of intellection): to sigh and be sorry.

Because most of these lyrics cast the meditator as a witness to sacred history instead of an active participant, it could be objected that they do not serve as proper analogues to Will's re-performance of Adam's sin in Passus 16. Medieval lyrics about Adam, however, often employ the permeable lyric voice to force an identification between Adam and the individual meditator in a manner difficult in the Crucifixion lyrics. For example, in the fifteenth century *Pilgrimage of the Soul*, a Middle English adaptation of Guillaume de Guilleville's fourteenth-century *Pèlerinage de l'âme*,²²⁰ the pilgrim-narrator is granted a vision of the souls in paradise after Christ's resurrection. Adam and Eve and "myche of her lynage" crowd around the tree from Genesis, where Saint Peter descends and feeds them the fruit of the new covenant, which is sweeter than the old apple which Eve first

²²⁰ The *Pilgrimage of the Soul* is, in fact, a translation of an adaptation of the *Pèlerinage de l'âme*. The translation is based on the early fifteenth-century transposition of Guillaume de Guilleville's poem into French prose by the monk Jehan de Gallopes. Caxton's 1483 printing of *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* uses this same Middle English translation for its source text, and Caxton's reading is nearly identical to what Gray prints in his anthology of religious lyric (see following note). For more information on Caxton's printing, see Blades 1971, 257-60.

craved. The taste of this superior fruit compels them to burst into song:

Adam bygynneth and alle these othre answeryn sewyngly as ye schul here hereafter, for this is the sentence of her seieng.

Heried be thou, blisful lord above,
That vouched saaf this journe forto take,
Man to bycome, only for mannes love,
And deth to suffren for oure synnes sake;
So hast thou us out of the bondes shake
Of Sathanas that held us longe in peyne:
Honoured be thou, Jesu sovereyne!

Full evel I dede whan I the appul toke;
I wende have had therby prosperite—
Hit sate so nyhe my sides that thei quoke.
To grete meschief I fel fro hye degree,
And all myn issu for bycause of me.
Now hast thou, lord, restorid al ageyn:
Honoured be thou, Jesu sovereyn!”²²¹

The song, its measured lines formally distinct from the framing prose narrative, is sung from Adam’s perspective; however, as this study has had frequent opportunity to demonstrate, the experiential first person pronouns invite the audience’s identification with Adam’s lyric voice. In fact, according to the text it is not only Adam who sings, but all his “issu,” who on account of his sin share his fate and the cause of his complaints. Adam commences the song and is answered by the others present in a sort of call-and-response fashion. In this sense, the words are Adam’s, first conceived by him, but soon become the words for all of his descendants, which they share just as they share (and, in a sense, repeat) his sin. Indeed, as the pilgrim learns from Grace Dieu

²²¹ Gray 1992, 100, 2.

in John Lydgate's Middle English translation of de Guilleville's work, composed around 1430, Adam's sin and punishment are common to all:

Pleyndly, yf I shal not feyne,
A gynnyng wych fro God kam,
And was fyrst yoven to Adam
And vn-to Eue hys wyff also,
Wych they loste, bothe two
Only for ther Rebellyon,
Whos ryht was by condycon,
Wherthrogh that ther posteryte
Ffully ha lost ther lyberte. . . .
Wher-for, yiff thow lefft vp thy syth,
And lyst conceyven everydel,
Thow mayst parceyvẽ fayr & wel
Thow art spottyd in party
Off that thy ffadrys wer gylty;
So that thy fylth ys causyd al
Only of synne orygynal,
Wych that clerkys in sentence
Calle wantyng, or carence
Off orygynal ryhtwysnesse,
Wyche thow oughtest (I dar expresse,)
Ellys haue hadde of equitye
By tyle of posteryte. (1110-8; 1132-48)²²²

Adam is the source of humankind's sinful state, and in this sense is both the cause and figurative embodiment of our postlapsarian existence: a particularly appropriate, representative identity for the lyric meditator to assume.

It should thus not be surprising to discover that the Adam-persona serves as the lyric speaker in meditative poems concerned with topics other than the Fall. As Adam's sin is common to all humankind, his expressed guilt and remorse do not individuate, but rather

²²² Lydgate 1899, 30.

universalize the lyric speaker. In Adam we can easily identify the sinful state of all humans who have been expelled from paradise. A notable example of such a lyric spoken in Adam's voice can be found in John of Grimestone's late fourteenth-century *Commonplace Book*. The lyric is a lullaby sung to the infant Christ—a common form for meditations on the Infancy:

Lullay, lullay, litel child,
 þu þat were so sterne & wild,
 Nou art be-come meke & mild,
 To sauen þat was for-lore.
 But for my senne i wot it is 5
 Pat godis sone suffret þis;
 Merci lord! I haue do mis,
 I-wis i wille no more.
 Azenis my fadris wille i ches
 An appel with a reuful res; 10
 Werfore myn heritage i les,
 & nou þu wepist þer-fore.
 An appel i tok of a tre,
 God it hadde for-boden me;
 Werfore i sulde dampned be, 15
 3ef þi weping ne wore
 Lullay for wo, þu litel þing,
 þu litel barun, þu litel king;
 Mankindde is cause of þi murning,
 Pat þu hast loued so 3ore 20
 For man þat þu hast ay loued so
 3et saltu suffren peines mo,
 In heued, in feet, in hondis to,
 & 3et wepen wel more.
 Pat peine vs make of senne fre, 25
 Pat peine vs bringge ihesu to þe
 Pat peine vs helpe ay to fle
 Pe wikkede fendes lore. Amen.²²³

²²³ Brown 1952, 80-1.

The speaker's remarks to the infant Christ about his destined suffering create a series of overlapping temporalities. The lyric describes one single, static moment with the infant Christ that simultaneously affords a wider perspective in which much of the past and future are exposed to view. The speaker is aware of the child's difficult destiny but can do no more in the moment than lull him to sleep with song. This speaker, who confesses to the crime of taking the apple, could very well be Adam or Eve. Yet the fact that the blame for Christ's sorrow shifts from the individual speaker ("for my senne i wot it is / Pat godis sone suffret þis" [5-6]) to all of "Mankindde" (19) suggests that the speaker could in fact be any person, for all of us are born in Adam's original sin and share with him his transgression. In this sense, we speak with Adam when we confess to taking the apple, and by occupying his speaking position we occupy that of every repentant sinner for whom Christ must suffer.

The universal identification with Adam's sin—the Original Sin which Christ's Incarnation was to overturn—is emphasized by another lullaby lyric from Grimestone's *Commonplace Book*:

Lullay, lullay litel child, child reste þe a þrowe,
 Fro heyze hider art þu sent with us to wone lowe;
 Pore & litel art þu mad, vnkut & vnknowe,
 Pine an wo to suffren her for þing þat was þin owe.
 Lullay, lullay litel child, sorwe mauth þu make;
 Þu art sent in-to þis werd, as tu were for-sake.
 Lullay, lullay litel grom, king of alle þingge,
 Wan i þenke of þi methchef me listet wol litel singge;
 But caren i may for sorwe, zef loue wer in myn herte,
 For suiche peines as þu salt drizen were neuere non so smerte.
 Lullay, lullay litel child, wel mauth þu crize,
 For þan þi bodi is bleyk & blak, sone after sal ben drize.
 Child, it is a weping dale þat þu art comen inne,

Þi pore clutes it prouen wel, þi bed mad in þe binne;
 Cold & hunger þu must þolen as þu were geten in senne,
 & after deyzen on þe tre for loue of al man-kenne.
 Lullay, lullay litel child, no wonder þou þu care,
 Þu art comen amonges hem þat þi detz sullen zare. . . .
 Lullay, lullay litel child, litel child þin ore!
 It is al for oure owen gilt þat þu art peined sore;
 But wolde we zet kinde be, & liuen after þi lore,
 & leten senne for þi loue, ne keptest þu no more.
 Lullay, lullay litel child, softe slep & faste,
 In sorwe endet eueri loue but þin at þe laste.²²⁴

The lyric speaker in this lullaby is not so individuated as in the previous example. The use of plural, first-person pronouns suggests that the speaker is a synecdochical representation of fallen humankind: it is for “oure owen gilt” that Christ must suffer, our sinful nature as embodied by Adam. Despite this corporate identity, the remorse expressed by the speaker is intimate and personal, generated by a solitary envisioning of the sort prescribed by Aelred. As the lyric speaker moves between an individual and corporate identity, so does the infant Christ. This is the child, the “king of alle þingge” who was sent into the world so he may “deyzen on þe tre for loue of al man-kenne.” While the lyric looks forward to this certain and particular future, it also dwells on the static scene that is at its heart—that image of a cold child in need of sleep—and in so doing portrays the infant Christ as any other suffering newborn. He, as if “geten in senne” like all humans (an admittedly startling description of the Incarnation, but one which serves to emphasize Christ’s new humanity), must endure the harshness of the weather as would any child. The layered temporalities of the lyric thus overlap the broad

²²⁴ Ibid., 83-4.

scope of the infant Christ's portrait. The child's present suffering in the cold cradle, common to all children, forecasts the greater suffering that only Christ will endure and survive on the cross.

Whereas Adam in these examples is representative of all humankind, Christ is represented by all children. In Adam we see ourselves, but in ourselves and our suffering we see the Infant Christ. In fact, Grimestone (or his source) would seem to have adapted his second lullaby from an even earlier poem with identical metrical structure found in the Kildare manuscript (MS Harley 913) in which the speaker describes to the infant (who is never identified as Christ) "þis wo adam þe wro3t":²²⁵

bestis and þos foules, þe fisses in þe flode,
and euch schef [*creature*] aliues, imakid of bone and blode,
whan hi commiþ to þe world hi doþ ham silf sum gode—
Al bot þe wrech brot [*child*] þat is of adam-is blode.
Lollai, lollai, litil child, to kar [*care, distress*] ertou [*are*
you] bemette [*destined*],
Pou nost no3t þis world-is wild bifor þe is isette.

"It would seem," claims Siegfried Wenzel in his study of these lullabies, that "Grimestone has taken up a poem on Everyman's wretched condition which was addressed to a weeping infant, and turned it into an address to the Christ Child, retaining its ancient seven-stress line, stanza form, and some verbal material. The earlier poem, from the Kildare manuscript, is the oldest English lullaby that has been preserved."²²⁶ We can imagine that the author of the Grimestone lullaby (who we will assume to be Grimestone for the sake of

²²⁵ The poem is printed in *Ibid.*, 35-6. For more on these poems and their relationship, see Wenzel 1986, 163ff.

²²⁶ Wenzel 1986, 165.

simplicity) found in the Kildare (or a related) poem a particularly fitting image for Christ on account of its emphasis on necessary suffering. Grimestone's lullaby acknowledges that the suffering of the newborn Christ is that of the typical human child. In this sense, the Christ Child's pains are universal, and through the lyric form we can identify and empathize with him, recognizing in his sensitivity to the cold those very weaknesses common to us all. Yet Christ's pains are compounded in a way that isolates him from humanity as well: not only does he suffer from original sin as do all who live in the fallen world, but the weight of that sin is also a constant reminder to Christ of man's infidelity, the cause of his "murning" and the immediate impetus for his Incarnation. Humanity's universal sin thus becomes a particularly focused anguish for the infant Christ, who until this point has never experienced Adam's transgression as a man. He must learn to bear that weight just as do all children born into the postlapsarian world.

And as Christ must learn to live as a human, so must humans learn to love him in return for his sacrifice:

Ler [*learn*] to louen as i loue þe;
 On al my limes þu mith i-se
 Hou sore þei quaken for colde;
 For þe i suffre michil wo.
 Loue me, suete, an no-mo—
 To þe i take & holde.²²⁷

These lines, also from Grimestone's *Commonplace Book*, preface a four-stanza poem (of the same rhyme scheme and meter) describing

²²⁷ Brown 1952, 91.

the Virgin Mary's apology to her newborn son for their poor lodgings.²²⁸ The stanza, its opening lines translated from the Latin verse *Sicut [te] dilexi disce [me] diligere* ("Just as I loved you, learn to love me"), also appears in what Wenzel identifies as a "roughly contemporary macaronic sermon for Saint Martin" in MS Harley 7322.²²⁹ The lines describe a necessary reciprocation between Christ and humankind: just as his love has compelled him to take flesh and learn to live as a human, so must humans learn to love in return so as to achieve spiritual salvation. This empathetic process for the humans is triggered by Christ's own suffering—not, in this instance, on the cross, which is the usual locus for affective, meditative poetry, but rather in the cradle. It is Christ's shivering from the cold like any infant that inspires man's love, his experiencing of the common "colde and wo" that threaten all infants.

This final example departs from the Wordsworthian ideal in a different manner than Aelred's letter. For whereas Aelred encourages

²²⁸ For a description of the poem's place in the manuscript, see Brown's notes in *Ibid.*, 268-9.

²²⁹ For a discussion of these lines and their possible Latin sources, see Wenzel 1986, 169-70. Another analogue appears in MS Rawl. C. 86, ff. 65-6, printed in Sandison 1913, 110-3. The fourth stanza of the poem, which recounts the words spoken to humankind by Christ on the cross, reads as follows:

I must love þe, I maye none oþer;
 Therfor love me agayne,
 Or ellys þou art an vnkynde broþer.
 My love to haue þou shuldest be fayn.
 In nede I þe helpe with myght and mayn,
 And now on þe crosse I dye for the,
 And suffir þornes to perich my brayn;
Quid ultra debui facere? ["What more should I have done?"] (25-32)

Christ once more urges reciprocation of his affections, though this time the impetus is not sorrow for his suffering, but a sense of just action: as he has done for us, so must we do in return lest we be *vnkynde*, or immoral.

his sister to place herself for the first time in an experience which she has never before personally witnessed, to see events unfold for the first time, here Christ's life is filtered through much more familiar experiences. The sensation of cold in the cradle is one that, even if we cannot recall it specifically, we certainly understand and experience in a variety of similar contexts. By forecasting Christ's unique suffering with such a mundane experience, the lyric transports us from what is familiar to mysteries that we cannot otherwise comprehend, alerting us simultaneously to our own intersections and disunions with another's experience.

It is this idea of placing oneself in another's experience, of experiencing what someone else has felt or thought or accomplished that becomes the dominating ideology for Will's final vision in *Piers Plowman*. Only by re-performing, by experiencing for ourselves, can we come to understand truth. For Will, such a re-experiencing involves re-enacting sacred history through the liturgy. For Christ, as we shall see, it involves becoming man.

The dream of the Tree of Charity is the first of a number of the poem's re-enactments of sacred history in *Piers Plowman*'s final passūs, one which is augmented by Langland's use of liturgical motifs throughout the last of Will's visions. It has often been noted by *Piers Plowman* scholars that the final passūs exhibit a greater dependency on the liturgy than do any of the preceding ones, although the extent of Langland's borrowings is still a matter of some dispute.²³⁰ Vaughan

²³⁰ One of the most thorough studies on the topic to date is Vaughan 1980. For a

identifies in passūs 16-19 a “liturgical modality” that adds a “clearer primary emphasis upon the Dreamer’s personal, active, moral involvement in the religion he believes in, an emphasis upon belief as something one lives by, as a matter of *doing* rather than simply of *knowing* or *professing*.”²³¹ To understand, in other words, one must act. Like Will in his vision of the Tree of Charity, one must taste the apple in order to know its savor. This “gulf between knowledge and action” is bridged by the liturgy, which “demands participation” from the audience in the events of sacred history that it makes “continuously present” via the process of re-performance.²³²

One of the first clear references to the liturgical calendar in the B-text occurs in Passus 16, when Will encounters Faith, represented by Abraham, on “a mydlenten sonday” (16.172). They are soon joined by Moses, who embodies Hope, and finally the Samaritan, who symbolizes Charity. All three biblical figures share the same goal: to find the Incarnate Christ—an intention that, chronologically speaking, should be impossible for each of them, since Abraham and Moses are Old Testament patriarchs and the Samaritan a figure from one of Christ’s parables. Their coexistence is made possible by the compression of time in passūs 16 and 17, which collect numerous moments in sacred history together to create a sort of timeless present on the verge of Christ’s Resurrection. Abraham can therefore speak of Christ’s baptism as a recent event (16.249-50), while Moses inquires

conservative re-evaluation of the connection between Langland and the liturgy, see Adams 1976, who concedes that “There can be no doubt of the existence of liturgical motifs” between passūs 16 and 19 (282).

²³¹ Vaughan 1980, 90 (emphasis added).

²³² Ibid., 90, 92, 99.

after a grown knight who is to hang upon the Cross (17.1-6); the Samaritan, finally, notes Christ's recent birth (17.125). Joseph Wittig refers to this "imaginative simultaneity" of moments from sacred history as an "omnitemporalness" that "creates exactly the kind of overlaid experiences for which the liturgy strives as it reenacts biblical events (both Old Testament 'figures' and their New Testament fulfillments) and applies them to current time."²³³

This "omnitemporalness," this "set of all moments," to recall Culler, is, as we have seen, also characteristic of the lyric. Lyric poetry abandons narrative progression in order to create a timelessness in which all moments are present. This makes the lyric an ideal vehicle for liturgical texts, which are designed to engage their audiences in sacred history, to generate "the effect of simultaneity in which past and present revitalize each other in the audience's imagination."²³⁴ A good example of the lyric's ability to overlay present experiences with sacred history is the hymn "Gloria, laus et honor tibi sit," part of the Palm Sunday liturgy that appears after the brief waking prologue to Passus 18. At the beginning of this passus, Will wanders through the waking world, "wolleward and weetshoed" until he falls asleep, dreaming:

Til I weex wery of þe world and wilned eft to slepe
 And lened me to a lenten, and longe tyme I slepte;
 Reste me þere and rutte faste til *Ramis palmarum*.
 Of gerlis [*children*] and of *Gloria laus* gretly me dremed,
 And how *Osanna* by Organye olde folk songen,
 And of cristes passion and penaunce, þe peple þat ofrau3te.
(18.4-9)

²³³ Wittig 1997, 128.

²³⁴ Ibid., 138.

The *Gloria, laus* was a hymn sung by children during the Palm Sunday procession.²³⁵ The hymn creates a sense of omnitemporalness by juxtaposing episodes from the Gospel with our actions in the present:

Plebs Hebraea tibi cum palmis obvia venit,
Cum prece, voto, hymnis assumus, ecce, tibi.
Hi tibi passuro solvebant munia laudis,
Nos tibi regnanti pangimus, ecce, melos.
Hi placuere tibi, placeat devotio nostra,
Rex pie, rex clemens, cui bona cuncta placent.
Fecerat Hebraeos hos gloria sanguinis alti,
Nos facit Hebraeos transitus, ecce, pius.²³⁶

[The Hebrew people went to meet you with palms;
Lo, we appear before you with prayer, vow, and hymns.
These [i.e. the Hebrews] offered tributes of praise to you, about
to suffer,
Lo, we compose song for you, reigning.
These have pleased you; let our devotion please,
Pious king, merciful king, whom all good things please.
The glory of noble blood had made these Hebrews,
Lo, the pious crossing makes us Hebrews.]

This excerpt from the hymn not only describes events from sacred history, but it also makes these historical events present by casting the Christian worshipers as inheritors of the Hebrew tradition. This sort of temporal substitution is common in medieval exegesis, where various New Testament figures are said to replace those from the Old, as the Church did to the Synagogue.²³⁷ The present, symbolic actions of Christian worshipers thus consciously recall and mimic the past, concrete deeds of the Hebrews. And by enacting this sort of transition between the past and present, this crossing over, the Christians who

²³⁵ See Alford 1992, 108.

²³⁶ *Analecta Hymnica medii aevi* 50, 160-1.

²³⁷ See Woolf 1962, 3.

sing the hymn actually *become* the new Hebrews (*nos facit Hebraeos transitus*). Sacred history is thus renewed and made present again via the act of singing, via the symbolic re-performance of lyric.

This hymn about re-enacting sacred events is part of a larger program in *Piers Plowman* that draws “upon Biblical history in its liturgical associations to underscore the present and personal relevance of past historical events.” Biblical texts become ones that can be reinhabited, resulting in a conflation of our present experiences and identities with those of the past: “it is by and in religious liturgy that the historical Redemption is made continuously present to the believing Christian, and by appropriate liturgical and sacramental behavior the Christian participates in the event and so too in its effects.”²³⁸

This brief scene of liturgical re-performance prefaces a passus that primarily re-narrates the sacred events surrounding Christ’s Passion, Resurrection, and Redemption. The sense of exposition is heightened by the loss of Will’s narrative intrusions, for he vanishes early in the passus, not to reappear until the beginning of Passus 19. As a result, the Redemption narrative momentarily eclipses the narrative of Will’s own experiences and development, and the central figure of the vision in Passus 18 becomes Christ, who is first seen riding towards Jerusalem in appearance greatly resembling both the Samaritan and Piers Plowman:

²³⁸ Vaughan 1980, 98.

Oon semblable to þe Samaritan, and somdeel to Piers þe
Plowman
Barefoot on an Asse bak bootles cam prikye
Wiþouten spores oþer spere; spakliche he lokede
As is þe kynde of a knyght þat comeþ to be dubbed,
To geten hym gilte spores and galoches ycouped. (18.10-4)

This passage sustains the sense of omnitemporalness with which the passus began, for Christ's entry into Jerusalem is substituted with the more contemporary image of a young knight on horseback, ready for his first joust. This martial anachronism becomes the dominating allegory of the Resurrection for the rest of this vision. Christ defeats the devil through a knightly ruse, donning another's armor so as to conceal his true identity:

This Iesus of his gentries wol luste in Piers armes,
In his helm and in his haubergeon, *humana natura*;
That crist be nozt yknowe here for *consummatus deus*
In Piers paltok þe Plowman þis prikiere shal ryde,
For no dynt shal hym dere as *in deitate Patris*.²³⁹ (18.22-6)

Identity conflation between knights is a common motif in medieval romance, especially English and French tales of the Arthurian court. Passus 18 thus achieves its sense of omnitemporalness via the evocation of contemporary literary conventions. The modernization of Christ's story imports the Passion into the realm of medieval literature where it is recontextualized and re-performed. Christ is cast as a noble (from the Old French adjective *gentil*) "aventrous," or an adventurous knight seeking Death, the greatest of all opponents.

²³⁹ The Latin phrases read: "human nature," "consummate/truly god," "in the divine nature of the Father"

Depictions of Christ as a knight anticipating battle are legion in medieval literature, although the predominant allegorization in later centuries was that of Christ the lover-knight, where Christ fights for the sake of his (often unfaithful) lover, the human soul.²⁴⁰ *Piers Plowman*'s portrayal of Christ as knight, however, largely neglects the erotic imagery common to the Christ-knight allegory of late medieval sermons and lyric. Here Christ drafts no love letters, voices no pleas, lamentations, or requests for his bride, the human soul, to return or unbar the door to him. Instead, Christ's characterization is purely martial, and as a result the symbol of greatest significance becomes his armor, *humana natura*, which he borrows from *Piers Plowman* in order to conceal his divinity, the *consummatus Deus*.

Christ's armor is another medieval literary type, one which might have its ultimate roots in Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians to put on the armor of God (Eph. 6:10-24). Rosemary Woolf, however, argues that the ultimate literary precedent for medieval descriptions of Christ's armor is in fact secular, stemming not from Ephesians but rather "quite clearly" from "the favorite set passages in the romances, in which the arming of a knight is described."²⁴¹ Woolf lists several representative examples of this motif in medieval religious literature, in addition to a rather distinctive treatment in an Anglo-Norman poem by Nicolas Bozon (fl. early 14th century). In Bozon's poem, Christ is armed as a knight by a maiden within Mary's womb:

Si entra en la chaumbre cele damoisele
 Qe de totes altres estoit la plus belle, . . .

²⁴⁰ See Woolf 1962.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 11. See also Woolf 1968, 44-55.

La damoisele l'arma de mult estraunge armure:
Pur aketoun li bailla blaunche chare et pure. . . .
Pour chaues de fere de nerfs mist la jointure,
Ses plates furent de os qe sisterènt à mesure.²⁴²

[Thus entered into the chamber the damsel
Who was more beautiful than all others. . .
The damsel armed him with very strange armor:
For a padded jacket she gave him flesh white and pure. . . .
For iron greaves she set the joining of sinews
His plates were of bone which fitted in the right proportions.]

True to romantic conventions, the knight is armed ceremoniously by a maiden in an isolated chamber. But here, as Woolf observes, Christ's arms are not "the outward signs of His sufferings and the instruments of the Passion," but rather simple human flesh: the nerves, skin, and bones that all children receive in the womb.²⁴³ As was the case with the Infancy lyrics, this humanization of Christ paradoxically both assimilates him to our own experience and distinguishes him from ordinary humans. Like all infants he receives flesh, the same flesh which, once exposed to the outer world, will so keenly feel the cold in the cradle. However, this prenatal arming scene illustrates precisely how Christ's experience differs from our own, as he dons his flesh with so much more ceremony and purpose than does the human infant. In Christ's hands, this suit of flesh will fulfill ambitions far beyond our ability to realize. Thus, just as Christ here inhabits an old suit of flesh in order to lend it a new purpose, so does Bozon's poem reinhabit established conventions to coax new significance from them.

²⁴² Woolf 1962, 12.

²⁴³ Ibid., 12.

Woolf identifies a similar passage from a macaronic sermon found in MS Balliol 149:

Et ecce qualiter mirabiliter iste miles fuit armatus ut procedet ad bellum. Primo habuit suum actoun corpus mundum, et pro sua hawberk quod est ful of holes habuit corpus suum plenum vulneribus; pro galea habuit coronam spineam capiti inpensam. . .²⁴⁴

[And lo, how marvelously was that knight armed to go to war. First he had for his *actoun* [i.e. a padded jacket worn beneath armor²⁴⁵] a pure body, and for his *hawberk* which is *ful of holes* he had his body, filled with wounds; for a helmet he had a crown of thorns immoderate for the head. . .]

Once more, Christ's armor is his flesh, although in this particular instance the flesh has already endured the Passion, distinguishing it from that of average humans. His pure flesh is covered in wounds, as if from battle, and his feet are shod with a nail. The cross becomes a steed which he rides and directs; it does not restrain his movement, but rather becomes a vehicle. Christ's knightly implements are thus formed from those very instruments forced upon him during the Crucifixion, and as such they are transformed from active agents working upon him to passive implements for his own use. His torturers, in this sense, become the squires who arm him in preparation for his coming battle in Hell. Although the emphasis on the Passion here isolates Christ from our own experience, for his armor is not the common suit of flesh he received at birth but rather that which has suffered and survived crucifixion, the text's clothing of the Passion within the familiar tropes of knighthood and chivalry serve

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 12.

²⁴⁵ *Middle English Dictionary* s.v. "aketoun"

to domesticate this moment of sacred history, to bring it closer to literary conventions familiar to medieval audiences.

One of the most notable treatments of the motif of Christ's armor in Middle English can be found in an early fourteenth century lyric attributed to the Franciscan friar William Herebert. The lyric is an address to the Virgin Mary that explores the paradoxes of her birthing of a child who is both her son and her Creator (another popular lyric commonplace²⁴⁶):

Pou wommon bouthe uere
Pyn oune uader bere.
Gret wonder þis was
Pat on wommon was moder
To uader and hyre broþer,
So never oþer nas.

Pou my suster and moder
And þy sone my broþer—
Who shulde þoenne drede?
Who-so hauet þe kyng to broder
And ek þe quene to moder
Wel auhte uor to spede.

Dame, suster and moder,
Say þy sone my broþer,
Pat ys domes-mon,
Pat uor þe þat hym bere,
To me boe debonere—
My robe he haueth opon.²⁴⁷

The lyric speaker invokes the familial relationship with God established by the Incarnation as grounds for mercy, exhorting Mary to remind Christ that “My robe he haueth opon.” Here, human flesh is

²⁴⁶ See Woolf 1968, 130ff.

²⁴⁷ Brown 1952, 19-20.

not armor with which Christ will do battle, but rather a temporary covering that brings Christ closer to man, although not close enough that the speaker will approach him without an intermediary. Nevertheless, the loan of the robe should, according to the speaker, predispose Christ to be *debonere*: gracious and favorable towards sinners.

As the lyric progresses, the robe of flesh gains greater significance:

Soethþe he my robe tok
Also ich finde in bok
 He ys to me y-bounde;
And helpe he wole ich wot,
Vor loue þe chartre wrot,
 Þe enke orn of hys wounde.

Ich take to wytnessing
Þe spere and þe crounyng,
 Þe nayles and þe rode,
Pat he þat ys so cunde,
Þys euer haueth in munde,
 Pat bouhte ous wyth hys blode.

When þou zeue hym my wede,
Dame, help at þe noede
 Ich wot þou myth uol wel,
Pat uor no wreched gult
Ich boe to helle y-pult—
 To þe ich make apel.

Nou, dame, ich þe byseche
At þylke day of wreche
 Boe by þy sones trone,
When sunne shal boen souht
In werk, in word, in þouht,
 And spek uor me þou one.

When ich mot nede apere
Vor mine gultes here
 To-uore þe domes-mon,
Suster, boe þer my uere

And make hym debonere,
 Pat mi robe haueth opon.

Vor habbe ich þe and hym
Pat markes berþ wyþ hym
 Pat charite him tok—
Pe woundes al bloody,
Pe toknes of mercy
 Ase techen holy bok—
Parf me noþing drede,
Sathan shal nout spede
 Wyþ wrenches ne wyþ crok. Amen.

The robe of flesh given Christ by Mary binds him to humankind. And it is the blood from Christ's wounds, from his physical body represented by the robe, that serves as the ink for the charter between man and the divine. This is the blood with which Christ has bought the human souls of the world to redeem them from suffering. The robe is thus the symbol of Christ's relationship with humanity and the locus of the sacrifice that makes possible the Redemption.

In all of these examples, a garment or armor of flesh provides Christ with a means of imitating humans, and this imitation, in some cases, binds him more closely to humanity. In *Piers Plowman*, we learn that the purpose of Christ's use of Piers' armor is not only to deceive Satan, but to learn. During the debate of the four daughters of God in Passus 18, Peace says:

For hadde þei wist of no wo, wele hadde þei nozt knowen;
For no wight woot what wele is þat neuere wo suffrede,
Ne what is hoot hunger þat hadde neuere defaute.
If no nyzt ne weere, no man as I leue,
Sholde wite witterly what day is to meene. . . .
So God þat bigan al of his goode wille
Bicam man of a mayde mankynde to saue
And suffrede to be sold to se þe sorwe of deying,

The which vnknytteth alle care and comsyng is of reste. . . .
 Forþi god, of his goodnesse, þe firste gome Adam,
 Sette hym in solace and in souereyn murþe,
 And siþþe he suffred hym synne sorwe to feeþe,
 To wite what wele was, kyndeliche to knowe it.
 And after god Auntrede hymself and took Adames kynde
 To wite²⁴⁸ what he haþ suffred in þre sondry places,
 Boþe in heuene and in erþe, and now til helle he þenkeþ
 To wite what alle wo is that woot of alle joye. (18.205-25)

To understand the suffering of the children of Adam, God had to take Adam's "kynde," or nature. He must occupy Adam's position, speak with him, possess the identity that is representative of all humankind. As Jill Mann remarks, "surprisingly, we find that God too had to go through this process of learning, 'to see the sorwe of deyinge'. . . The union of God and man in 'kynde' means that they are united in their thirst for knowledge. The appetite for knowledge which drove man to sin drives God to redeem him, since it sends him down to earth to become flesh and die."²⁴⁹

Christ must learn; he must know about his creation "kyndely." He must gain a direct knowledge of human experience, and the only way of achieving this "kynde" knowing is through re-enactment: he must be born as other humans and share their mortal fate in order to learn what they have already suffered on earth and in hell. Need, at the beginning of Passus 20, describes Christ's transformation as becoming "needy," a state of being impossible for God in his divinity:

And god al his grete loye goostliche he lefte
 And cam and took mankynde and bicam nedy.
 So he was nedy, as seiþ the book in manye sondry places,
 That he seide in his sorwe on þe selue roode:

²⁴⁸ I favor the well-attested "wite" over the Athlone's reading of "se."

²⁴⁹ Mann 1979, 41-2.

“Bope fox and fowel may fle to hole and crepe
And þe fissh haþ fyn to flete wiþ to reste;
Ther nede haþ ynome me þat I moot nede abide
And suffre sorwes ful soure, þat shal to loye torne.” (20.40-7)

Christ’s words on the fox and fowl were actually not spoken from the cross, but rather to a scribe aspiring to become a disciple (Mt. 8:20). Recent scholarship has successfully dispelled the belief that this anachronistic attribution was a mistake on Langland’s part, for in fact the association of Christ’s words in Matthew 8 with the Passion was not uncommon.²⁵⁰ Despite the precedent set in medieval literature for this reattribution, the conflating of two biblical passages fits neatly into *Piers Plowman*’s program of creating layered literary experiences. In this instance, an aphorism is transformed into a lament. What was first a gnomic dispensation of wisdom later becomes in the context of the Crucifixion a sorrowful realization: Christ’s earlier words to the scribe about human nature now appropriately describe his own individual situation. The words have become wholly self-referential, and Christ, finally inhabiting them fully, experiences them in a way impossible before his Passion. Need has, finally, taken Christ, and now that he understands sorrow, he can “wite what wele” is and turn sorrow into joy.

But just as Christ has learned to emulate man, so must we learn to emulate Christ, and ultimately the one who must learn “kyndely” in *Piers Plowman* is Will. The application of sacred history to our own situation is ultimately the functional purpose of liturgy, and in Will’s

²⁵⁰ For a concise index to scholarship on these lines, see Barney 2006, 203.

waking moments we can measure the efficacy of his experiential encounters within his dream. In Will's final awakening at the commencement of Passus 19, he seems at last to put into practice some of what he has learned. Instead of wandering without purpose in the waking world, Will wakes, dresses himself, and heads to church to hear mass:

Thus I awaked and wroot what I hadde ydremed,
And dighte me derely and dide me to chirche
To here holly þe masse and to be housled after.
In myddes of þe masse þo men yede to offryng
I fel eftsoones aslepe, and sodeynly me mette
That Piers þe Plowman was peynted al bloody
And com in wiþ a cros bifore þe comune peple,
And rizt lik in alle lymes to our lord Iesu. (19.1-8)

M. F. Vaughan has the following to say on the significance of Will's unusual feat of purposeful activity:

The poem's final awakening, the one after which there is no further recourse to dreams, is filled with promise, as the Dreamer accomplishes, not his salvation or perfection, but one dramatic step in his own transformation: he becomes the poem's narrator, finally seeing the personal application of all he has dreamed and experienced. And so he begins to do something that has the flavor of moral consciousness about it, even if it is only to reflect upon and recount his story from the perspective of an advanced (though still limited) moral enlightenment. His lived and dreamed experiences become a text for reflexive interpretation and moral glossing, and self-centered pride yields to the self-consciousness of humility. He turns from selfishly examining the world and others to examining himself.²⁵¹

Will's dream experiences, as Vaughan claims, are set down at the beginning of the passus and become poetry to be experienced and

²⁵¹ Vaughan 1980, 91.

reflected upon. But even this act of writing is a literary fiction, a perpetuation of the ruse that the dream vision Will experiences is an unmediated experience that must be recorded and not created. However, the dream in fact is Langland's conscious literary production, one which is a mediated participation in a well-established genre of medieval dream narrative. And even if Will does begin to pursue a more moral course of action as a result of his reflection upon the preceding poem, he nevertheless fails to realize his goal, as he sinks into his familiar slumber before the mass is over. Will's moral action is thus abruptly aborted, and the allegedly spontaneous dream vision reclaims its hold.

Yet whether or not Will himself acknowledges the fact, *Piers Plowman* as a text is an object for reflection. What is important about Will's failed attempt to attend mass is the recognition that the experiencing of the poem's vision has some bearing upon our own lives. Will's inquiring (and often uncomprehending) gaze is, if only for a moment, turned in on himself. But although his gaze does not linger there, the next sight that fills Will's vision within his dream is also, in a sense, introspective. For Will dreams immediately of the Christ-knight again, although this time Christ is not dressed in Piers' armor, but rather Piers is the one who is clothed, painted with blood and in all respects resembling Christ. Will soon discovers, after inquiring with Conscience, that the man before him is actually Christ, not Piers, but the conflation of the two characters, emphasized by Will's mistaken identification, is crucial. For just as Will, gazing at the bloody Christ, sees only Piers (who is the poem's representative

embodiment of *imitatio Christi*), so too we must see ourselves in Christ who consciously emulated us.

The identification between Christ and man is therefore reciprocal in *Piers Plowman*. Whereas traditional lyric portrayals of Christ facilitate our identification with him by importing him, via a species of Aelred of Rievaulx's experiential meditation, into the realities of contemporary life, *Piers Plowman* takes this process a step further by insisting that Christ in turn must participate in human experience not for our benefit, but for his own. The reciprocal projections of Christ into human experience (such as the fighting in our flesh) and humans into sacred history in Langland's poem is effected by the mediation of various textual commonplaces (from hymns to the commonplaces of chivalric literature) through Will's experiential dream vision emphasize the mutual sharing between Christ and man. The result is a curious blending of *clergie* and *kynde wit* that, coupled with the re-enactment of literary commonplaces in the final *passūs*, generates knowledge that can only be learned by experience.

Bibliography

ABBREVIATIONS

CC	<i>Corpus Christianorum</i>
CCCM	<i>Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis</i>
CCSL	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i>
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
EETS	<i>Early English Text Society</i>
NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>

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